LURED TO THE LAKE

Shimmering Lake Summer Camp Book Two

a Silent Woods story

LAIKA WALLACE

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A Silent Woods story

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Second edition

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To the real John, Alan, and Aileen.

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Chapter One (Ava)

The summer sun cooked me through the floor to ceiling windows as I watched my baby brother playing on the living room floor. He pushed a ball around, gurgling excitedly as it knocked into the table, the couch, my feet. He wasn't really my baby brother, I guess; he was the biological child of my adoptive parents. My real brother, Henry, was outside with Alan, our adoptive dad, helping him cook the special barbecue dinner to celebrate the end of our school year. That's what they said, anyway. I knew it was for Gwen, our sister, who had improved her marks by two whole letter grades since last year. Henry had lost his report card. I stayed exactly where I had been, like always.

The door to the porch slid open as Alan poked his head in. "Are you coming to join us, Ava?"

I looked as sorry for myself as I possibly could. "I don't know…"

He gave me a lukewarm smile. "Those darn summer colds, huh? Well, you've got a seat out here if you feel up to it."

"Thanks," I said meekly.

"Aileen will bring your plate up to your room, if you'd like to head up. She can put Cole down for his nap at the same time."

Behind Alan, I saw Henry roll his eyes dramatically at the

mention of the baby.

Cole's head lifted. "Ba?"

"It's ball," I said in my baby-talk voice, leaning closer to him.

Alan coughed quietly. "Try to keep away from him if you're sick."

I immediately shot back up. "Sorry Alan."

He shut the door. My stomach twisted, even though I knew realistically he wasn't upset with me. Or at least he wasn't mad at me. He just cared a lot about his baby; more than he cared about the three of us, in my opinion. It made sense. We were only adopted because they didn't think they could have kids. That was five years ago, though. Things changed.

I wondered if they'd grown to regret their choice.

When Aileen came inside from the porch, I gave her a sheepish smile before hurrying down the hall, past the adults' bedroom, Cole's room, and the bathroom, to the spiral staircase. Upstairs, we essentially had the whole floor to ourselves. There was a balcony that we shared at the end of the hall, a bathroom for us to fight over, and a bedroom for each of us. Aileen and Alan had given up a workout room and renovated a huge part of the balcony to give the three of us private bedrooms. They said it was no trouble, but I'd felt bad since the day we arrived, when I was eleven years old. Henry didn't care, though; Gwen and I have always done that doubly for him.

I shut myself into my room, at the end of the hall across from the bathroom. Curling up on my bed, I held my old stuffed teddy and looked drearily at my things: my laptop and lava lamp on my desk with a pile of my CDs, a box of DVDs on the floor, my huge dresser topped with a collection of candles and pine cones. My walls were painted light pink but the color hardly showed through my posters. I had everything from

diagrams on how to gut a fish, photos of huge redwood trees, a couple tourist posters from the gift shop at the park where Alan gave guided tours, posters from my favorite movies, and a couple of posters from concerts I'd gone to. None of that was from before we moved here. The only thing I'd taken with me was my teddy bear, a backpack I'd donated long ago, and the clothes on my back, which I'd grown out of. Aileen had put them aside, along with Gwen's and Henry's, to make our Christmas stockings.

I'd completely remade my life here. All of us had. The first four or so years were wonderful, even though they were hard at the start. We each had problems adjusting to living here; Henry had to learn that it wasn't okay to take out his anger on these parents, Gwen had problems making friends at school, and I had to step out of my comfort zone in terms of being in the wilderness. Now Henry was getting really good at hunting and making traps, Gwen was forming good relationships with her teachers, and I found a love for fishing.

But then we all found out about Cole. There was a rift now, a rift Gwen won't cross, I can't cross, and Henry only wants to make deeper. I had no idea how we were going to handle this summer.

A soft knock at the door startled me.

"Yes?" I croaked.

"It's me," Aileen's soft voice called from behind the door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," I said, sitting up.

She walked in with a warm smile, holding a plate of food. She set it down on my desk and asked to sit on my bed with me. I scooted over to let her.

"Your cold's getting you down?" she said, brushing her long,

blonde braid over her shoulder. We looked so different. It always made Gwen uncomfortable when we went out as a family, with her pitch black hair and round face. Aileen was a little chubby, but her face was long and lean, and Alan was built like a brick house. Henry and I were lanky and awkwardly shaped, with messy brown hair. Us three had the same dull brown eyes, contrasting Aileen and Alan's blue. But the worst part of it was that here, in a small town, everybody knew everybody, so there was no acting like we were really their kids.

"Yeah," I answered slowly, realizing I'd been stuck in thought for a while.

She gave a little chuckle. "I can tell. It's okay. Please get some rest tonight and tomorrow, sweetheart," she reached over to gently squeeze my hand, "it would be a shame if you were too sick to go to camp."

My eyes widened.

"It's okay, we'll talk about that when we get there. For now, just eat what you can and rest."

"Okay," I murmured.

She stood up. "I love you. Do you want me to come up in a while for your plate, or can you manage on your own?"

"I'll do it," I said quickly. "I love you too. Thanks Aileen."

She headed to the door, but paused to look back at me. "You can call me Mom, you know."

I froze.

"You don't have to, but you're allowed to."

I had to stop looking at her, and she left without another word. The twisting feeling in my stomach returned.

Ignoring my dinner, I set to packing my bags for camp. There was no way I wasn't going. I wasn't even really sick, I was

only saying that to get out of doing things with the family since school ended about a week ago. Gwen's success and my stagnation made me feel like an outcast around them. It wasn't the healthiest coping mechanism, but I didn't know what else to do.

I had packed a couple bags of clothes when I realized I didn't have many hobbies that didn't involve my laptop, which I didn't want to bring, or just being outside, so I had nothing else to pack right away. Camp didn't start until July 4th, two days from now. Sighing, I pushed the bags under my bed.

My door opened with a creak. I whipped around to see Gwen standing there, looking glum.

"What's up?" I said curtly but sympathetically, even though I wanted to remind her to knock first.

"It's no fair that you get to stay home from camp and I don't. I don't wanna go." She plopped herself down on my bed with a huge huff.

"Who told you that?"

"Aileen said so," she said, crossing her arms. "And it's true, isn't it? You've not even eaten your dinner."

I glanced at it. Between the nervous stomachache I was getting and the coldness of the burger, I wasn't very excited about eating it. But I had a point to prove. I picked it up and forced a bite.

Gwen sighed loudly. "You're faking."

"What do you mean?" I said through a mouthful of food that I struggled to swallow.

Seeing me shudder, she groaned and grabbed the plate away from me. "Give me that. I'll eat it. Still unfair!"

I sat beside her, tucking my arms around my waist, feeling my ribs touch my arms. "It's just cold," I muttered, "and you

know how I get when adults get…"

She looked at me, afraid.

"Nobody's mad, it's alright, Alan just got a bit upset with me for being close to Cole while he thinks I'm sick."

She paused. "You are sick, though."

"I'm not. I only said so because I didn't want to hang out with you guys."

Hurt painted her face.

I rushed to correct myself. "I didn't mean it that way! It's just, like, seeing them all happy about your good grades while Henry's being a jerk, it doesn't make me feel good. He's so mad all the time about the baby and now about you doing well in school." I looked at my hands for a second. "And I'm kind of jealous that you're doing better but I'm still barely average."

She looked at me for a long time, her brows knitted, and put the plate down on the corner of my bed. "I'm sorry, Ava," she said tearfully. "I don't mean to make you feel bad."

"Hey, I never said that," I said, showing her my hand.

She bit her lip and touched my hand lightly before twisting her fingers into her hair. "It still isn't…"

"Fair? Yes it is. You're doing well and that's great. You don't need to feel bad or bring yourself down for me. We're different people… Maybe I'm just not…" I shook my head. "No need to be negative about it, is my point. I'm just sad because I feel like I haven't improved, not because you have. Seeing it in you and not in myself makes me see how much of a disappointment I am to Alan and Aileen."

She rubbed tears from her cheeks. "They said that?"

I didn't respond. They never did, but that's what their actions, their expressions, their tones tell me.

"Well, I'm not disappointed in you. You're doing great."

I shrugged but I felt my ears get hot. "It's more about Henry anyway," I lied, sort of.

She nodded. "I don't know how to handle him. He scares me," she said shakily. "I don't want him to…"

I glanced up at her to see she was trying very hard not to cry. "You can cry, Gwen. It's okay. He's not going to find you in here."

She broke down.

I let her, quietly moving the plate to my desk and bringing her the tissue box. When she recovered, she frustratedly told me she'd rather be the one failing with friends than succeeding alone. I was about to retort that I had no friends either when she went on about how she'd caught Henry sneaking out of school to drive around with his friends.

"That's why he's failing," she concluded, grabbing a fistful of her hair. "He doesn't deserve to go to camp! And I don't want to. I don't like the outdoors. But you love it, and you need it, that's why it's so unfair, Ava."

"Oh, Gwen…"

She sobbed again. I hummed softly to comfort her and she slowed down a lot faster this time. For a few moments, we sat in silence, staring at my floor.

"Are you girls okay up there?" Aileen called from downstairs. I heard the water running; she was probably washing the dinner dishes.

"Yeah," I called. "We'll be right down."

"No need if you're sick, dear," Aileen said, but I had already grabbed the plate and opened the door.

Gwen gave me a sneaky look and I returned it, putting a finger to my lips. We hurried downstairs and into the kitchen. Henry watched us from the couch where Alan was playing with Cole;

our brother was doing his best to ignore them while listening to music through his headphones. Putting the plate in the sink, I politely took over the chore.

"Are you sure, dear? You don't need to do this," Aileen protested.

I smiled at her. "I'm sure."

She made a happy noise in her throat, leaning on the counter. "And you finished it all too."

A pang of nervousness shot through me. Behind us, Gwen sighed.

"How are you feeling?" Aileen asked me.

"Better," I said, a little too loudly. "Much better."

A slow smile crept across her face. "Better enough to go to camp with your siblings?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

"I don't want to go, Aileen," Gwen said sheepishly, pulling at a strand of her hair. "I don't like outdoors stuff, and I'd rather stay here."

"Where there's just more outdoors stuff?" Alan piped up. "Come on, Gwen. A change of scenery would be nice for you. Especially after how hard you've been working."

"And now your sister will be there with you," Aileen said.

Gwen looked at me for help.

"Yeah, I'll be there," I got out in a rush before going back to the dishes.

Gwen sighed, defeated. "Okay. Can you help me pack when you're done, Ava?"

I nodded.

Alan reminded Henry that he needed to pack too, so he stormed off to his room. Aileen then had a quiet talk with her husband while Gwen waited for me to finish. I purposefully

took a long time. When I dried my hands, she didn't look at me, and she only spoke once we were in her room.

"You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am, Gwen. I'm trying to help you."

"How is this helping me? I told you I don't want to go."

"Would you rather be stuck here all summer without any friends?"

She shoved clothes wordlessly into her bag for a moment. "Rather here than some random island in the middle of the woods."

"You don't know you won't make any friends there," I tried to argue.

She rolled her eyes. "You sound just like Alan and Aileen."

I couldn't counter that. "You'll have me, anyway."

"You're not my friend," she retorted, looking up at me through her bangs, "you're my big sister."

"I'm on your side either way," I said. "Now stop just stuffing clothes in there. Roll them up first, it'll give you more room."

Chapter Two (Sid)

The wind offered little relief from the dry July heat as my sister and I marched through the long grass to the creek at the edge of our property. I hated having to pull my socks all the way up, it made my leg hair itch, but it was easier than sticking a lighter to my ankle to coax out a tick. Genette didn't have to worry about socks with her knee-high converse, but she complained loudly about all the little rocks and bumps in the earth hurting the soles of her feet.

The green blades of grass tickled my arms, and the stiff goldenrod stems brushed past me as we walked. There were swathes of sunflowers and milkweed interspersed with the flattened deer beds in the field.

A few paces ahead of me, Genette swore and jumped to the side.

"What's up?" I asked, freezing.

"Thistle," she said, rubbing her arm. "Big sucker too. Why do we walk through the tall grass again?"

I followed her new path, looking out at the field adjacent, which bordered our neighbor's property. The grass was never taller than a couple inches, since the village kids used it as a soccer field. My uncle was riding on the tractor right now, mowing it. He waved at us with a smile.

"Tradition," I answered. "And John's always in the way."

Genette mumbled something about reminding her to rip out the big thistle plant later.

We came to the creek's edge and stood in awe of its dark water, a smooth surface hiding a raging current. The cattails and lush grass rustled as frogs frantically hopped into the water. Twigs and leaves swirled down the creek's path, disappearing into the shadow of the metal culvert. An old board provided a ramp for us to climb onto the culvert's spine and cross to the other bank. From there, we set out into the woods. Branches skimmed over Genette's leather jacket, but snagged on my tank top, leaving fine pink scratches on my skin. I winced whenever they nicked a bug bite. The buzzing of bugs got louder as the ground started to give way to spongy earth, leaving arched roots as the surest footholds.

The trees back here weren't as grand as the ones in the woodland behind our other neighbor's wheat field. Instead, they resembled knotted hair, almost too thick to get through. I remembered when we first moved here from Genette's parents' house, she took John's machete to the thicket and cleared out a den for us. That's how we found the old cow fence.

It stretched as far as we could walk in both directions, eventually getting stuck in a tree before the dirt path between our land and the wheat field. It was completely rusted. There were three rungs to it, the highest being right in the middle of my belly. We figured we could climb it if we shimmed up a post, but the barbs were still sharp, and we worried too much about slicing open our thighs. Whatever hid back there wasn't worth a risk like that.

Besides, all that lay beyond was a swamp and a decrepit farmhouse. And we both knew what Grandma said about the

swamp.

As the temperature began to drop with the setting of the sun, we crossed back over and walked through the mowed field. Raccoons lived in the old, unused well, so we didn't want to chance meeting one in the long grass. From there, it was just a short jaunt up a gentle incline to the driveway. The field and the farmhouse were separated by a line of truly massive trees that sounded like the ocean when the wind blew through their heavily furnished boughs. The clunky red van sat in front of the house, which was a long bungalow. On the other side was a strip of garden and the neighbor's white picket fence.

We walked inside and took off our shoes in the mud room. I sat on the trunk full of winter clothes, waiting for Genette to loosen her laces enough to free her feet. When she was ready, we went up the hall to the kitchen. Grandma and John were serving up mashed potatoes, chicken nuggets, and salad from the garden.

They weren't related by blood. Grandma married John's mother, my mother's mother, after they both divorced their husbands. She passed away when we moved here seven years ago, when I was seven and Genette was turning ten. Aside from then, I only met her when I was a toddler, before I went to stay with Genette's family in Oregon, before the incident with my mother…

"Hey kiddos," Grandma said, brushing her silvery hair from her face. "How was your walk?"

"Good," Genette said, taking her seat at the table. "How's your wrist doing?"

Grandma looked a little shy. "Ah, it's okay today. The sprain should be healed by the time you two are off at camp…"

John put our plates on the table, looking up at her seriously.

"Fran."

She covered her mouth. "Oh dear, did I let something slip?"

Genette leaned her elbows on the table, looking up at the two adults ferociously. "No way. I'm not going to no camp."

John sighed and crossed his arms. "You will be. In two days," he said tiredly.

"Two days?!" Genette shouted. "And you didn't think to tell us sooner?"

"Or ask us," I quietly added.

"No need for yelling," he said, turning back around to put food on his plate.

Fran, a little subdued, sat down with her dinner. "I'm sorry, kids. It was supposed to be a happy surprise. Your guidance counselors recommended it, for building your leadership skills and expanding your social circles. You're not officially going yet, you still have to fill out a form, but they have our address and your names. You'll be picked up before noon on the fourth of July."

"What if I don't fill out the form?" Genette challenged, speaking at a better indoor volume.

"Nobody will force you to get on the bus."

John sat down and told Genette coolly to just enjoy her dinner. We ate in silence for a bit, then John started telling me about something funny that had happened in a video game he was playing.

After dinner, Genette and I went to our rooms. She was still mad, and I knew she wanted to talk, so I opened my window. Our rooms faced the backyard, across the hall from Grandma's room, and we both had a window overlooking the shed. The slightly slanted roof was less than a foot under our windows, so we could step out onto it easily. Each year, we made sure to

test that it could hold our weight so we could keep using it to gossip. Genette used to tease me about that when I got close to two hundred pounds, but she stopped when kids at school called me names.

When I heard Genette's window creak open, I shimmied over the sill and delicately lowered myself onto the shed's roof. Sitting cross legged, I waited for her to join me. Her pale, twiggy legs stuck out at wild angles as she tried to get her body through the window. Ungracefully, she flopped onto the roof with a groan.

"I'm out of practice," she complained.

"It's been a while."

She righted herself and checked for splinters on her legs. "Yeah. So I'm pissed about this."

"Rightfully, I think."

"But they won't hear a word of it, I'm sure."

"No siree."

"I'm not filling out that form." She spat over the edge of the roof.

"Why not give it a chance? Rebellion won't make a difference right now anyway."

She hunched, frowning, which made her hair fall into her face. It was thick and more brown than mine, and where mine was even and silky, hers had at least three different textures. It was very obvious that we weren't related, with her skin so white she glowed in the dark, her sharp facial features, big eyes and thin limbs. My skin was sort of pale, but my face was round and my nose was flat. I was also nearly twice her weight, even though I was two years younger and seven inches shorter.

"I don't want to be stuck with a bunch of happy go lucky, school spirit loving, academic jock types."

"What do you mean?" I asked with an amused smirk.

"You know, like, city high school kids, and the rich kids at our school. They excel in everything and it's tiring to be around."

"You don't know for sure that's who's gonna be there," I argued, leaning back against the wall. The windowsill dug into my back a bit.

"Who else would be at a leadership camp?"

I paused, thinking. "Maybe more kids like us."

She shrugged, not saying anything. I knew she didn't believe me.

"If they wanted us to come specifically, then they'd probably ask other kids like us," I explained.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. You're welcome to fill out that form, but I'm not falling for it."

So, after we crawled back inside, I did.

It was a short and fairly open-ended form. It asked for my preferred name and pronouns, informing me that my therapist, psychologist, social worker, or guidance counselor had sent them my legal information. Then there were some questions about myself, like what I enjoyed doing and what set me apart from my peers. It capped off there with a bright red SUBMIT button.

I ran into Grandma and John in the tiny washroom while we all brushed our teeth before bedtime. John wasn't going to sleep yet; he liked to stand with Grandma and talk before she went to bed.

"So, did you fill out the form for the camp?" John asked me when Grandma was rinsing her mouth.

I moved out of the doorway to let him go. "I did. It seems neat."

"Where is it again?" Grandma asked.

"Shimmering Lake, in Silent Woods."

They both got quiet and hurried up to go to their rooms, saying goodnight.

Genette came out of her bedroom after Grandma had shut her door and John had gone into the kitchen.

"What was that about?" she asked me, walking into the bathroom.

"I don't know," I mumbled. "They haven't gotten that weird since we said we saw a horse in the swamp out back."

Genette turned the sink on to wet her toothbrush, glowering down at the flow of water. She didn't offer me anything, either, for the rest of the night.

Chapter Three (Ava)

As time went on, I found myself getting more and more excited for the camp. I got the idea in my head that I was being pushed away, but I tried to not let that overshadow the hope of making friends with people like me. Maybe Henry would learn how to be kinder, too, and Gwen would feel more at peace with herself. The two of them still hadn't come around, but I wanted the best for them, and I guess, similarly, so did the parents.

On the morning of the fourth, we had a big breakfast on the back porch. Aileen was exhausted from being up all night with Cole, so she wasn't there.

Gwen was tense and quiet, picking at her pancakes.

"Aren't you gonna eat that?" Henry started to tease her.

"It's okay to not be able to," I told her, giving him a harsh look before he could say worse. "I have trouble eating when I'm nervous, too."

She gave me a halfhearted smile, looking like she might cry. "Yeah, I'm so anxious it's making me sick."

"That's a first," Henry jeered under his breath.

I kicked him in the shin and he moved to throw his fork at me, but thought better.

Alan leaned over the table and put his hand on Gwen's gently. She quickly withdrew.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay, you don't need to finish. I'll pack it up," he said, recovering from his blunder with her physical boundaries by taking her plate. "Do you want me to toss a couple of Ava's meal replacement drinks into your snack pack?"

"Oh, sure, thank you," she said meekly.

He smiled warmly at her as he stepped through the door.

As soon as it was shut, Henry exploded at her. "I can't believe you're wasting food. You only can't eat because you were eating garbage all night in your room. Don't you realize I can hear you? You're across the hall and it's not like you're quiet."

"I wasn't! I don't keep food in my room," she spat. "I'm not a slob like you."

He laughed coldly. "The pot calls the kettle black."

She glanced at me. "I don't even know what that means."

He hollered in laughter as Alan opened the door.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Gwen and I said in sync.

Alan blinked. "Okay. Well… You have about three hours to get ready now. Aileen's asked me to wake her at ten so she can say goodbye."

Henry said that he needed to pack, so he went in and up to his room. Alan shut the screen door and left me outside with my sister, who was feverishly brushing away tears.

"You should try to cry less," I said, but that wasn't what I meant.

Her shoulders slumped. "I know."

"I didn't really mean that," I murmured, trying to think of the right words, but they just wouldn't come.

"I get it," she seethed, standing up and making the chair scrape on the wood. "You follow along with Henry's bullying like

everyone else."

The door shuddered as she went. All alone, I watched the wind in the trees, holding my arms with a vice grip.

I was still out there like that when Aileen woke up. I heard them all talking through the door. She eventually came out to see me. She was still in her pajamas, and she sat beside me at the table.

"Are you okay, Ava?"

I didn't want to look at her, but I was too scared not to. "I… I'm okay."

"You can talk to me," she said sweetly, extending a hand.

I took it.

"Are you worried about going to camp? It's gonna be really nice. The counselors seem caring and knowledgeable. One of them was even a camper there last year."

I shook my head. "I know I'll be okay. I'm worried about Henry and Gwen."

She tilted her head. "I think this will be good for both of them. For you, too."

It took me a bit, but I did agree. She stroked my knuckles with her thumb, not saying anything for a while. I felt overwhelmed that she cared about me. It had been five years since they got custody, and six since they started fighting for it, but man did it ever hit me sometimes.

"Do you think I'm a good person?" I blurted, but that wasn't quite what I wanted to say. "I mean… Do I show people that I care enough?"

Aileen smiled sadly. "I know you care a whole lot about our whole family, Ava. We care about you too, just as much. Your siblings might not express it the same, but you know better than I do about the hardships you all faced. You can't blame

any of you three for the things you struggle with today."

I was speechless. How could she read my mind so well? My body was shaking without me realizing it, and then I was sort of crying. She pulled me into a hug, standing us both up. I held her tightly, hiding my face in her shoulder.

"Thank you, Aileen," I whispered.

Stroking my back and humming softly, she rocked me. "You really can call me Mom, you know."

"I know."

Chapter Four (Sid)

We had a big family barbecue the night before we left, and said our goodbyes in the morning. Genette and I packed in a hurry because we'd put it off the whole time. The bus had to wait a minute or two while we finished. It came so early; it didn't feel entirely like it was our fault.

When we'd finally gotten our things out the door, a tall ginger man who looked like a very nervous lumberjack stepped off the bus.

"Hi," he said, waving at us. "I'm Jason, I'm one of the counselors. I can help you get your bags on the bus if you'd like."

Genette dragged her two suitcases up to the shoulder of the road. "Where do we put these?"

He gently touched the sliding cover of the undercarriage, then pulled it open.

She grunted with effort as she lifted her bags into the compartment. I carried mine up much more carefully, putting them near hers. There were already some bags in there. Genette waved to Grandma and John tersely before marching onto the bus, but I went back to give them hugs. I didn't think she was being very mature, but I didn't mention that to anyone.

There was a girl on the bus already. She was fat, like me, and

had so many freckles down her arms, on her shoulders, and across her face. She had a long, glossy red braid tied with a blue bow, and she wore a delicate white sundress decorated with blue flowers. She was very pretty. She politely introduced herself as Abigail.

"I'm Genette," my sister said, dropping her school bag on the seat across from the girl. She flopped down next to her bag. "This is my little brother Sid."

I waved, too shy to speak, and hurried to the seat behind Genette.

As we drove away, I felt restless and anxious. Looking out the window, I remembered the train ride from Portland to Toronto, where my uncle picked us up. I had been quite young, so the memories were fuzzy, but I remembered being so scared. I didn't think I'd see my family again, or even Genette's family. Losing my mother had been horrible, and then so quickly having my only remaining parents push us off to Canada… It wasn't good for me.

On that train ride, I thought of my mother constantly. Then, I had heard her voice in my mind, but now I can only recall her face: the roundness of her cheeks, the softness of her skin like amber honey, just like mine. The silkiness of her midnight blanket of hair. The twinkle of her black eyes when she laughed.

I sucked in a shaky breath and realized that I'd started to cry a bit. I rubbed my face, trying not to look obvious about it, and focused on the scenery.

The highway led us through pasture after pasture of cattle, field after field of soybeans and corn and wheat, speckled with sparse, clumpy woodland. Occasionally, there was a stretch of land where the trees had been felled. The ground was dark and marred, lifeless, but we moved so quickly, it was gone in a flash.

Other times, there were empty fields that weren't being used, or a small flock of sheep, or a couple horses. Distantly, I could see grain silos and farmhouses.

"Where is the camp, Abigail?" I asked after a while, leaning over the back of Genette's seat.

"Shimmering Lake," she said.

"We know, that's the name of it," Genette snorted. "But where is it?"

"Silent Woods."

"And where's that?"

Abigail smiled. "You'll see."

At the back of the bus, the washroom door flung open. A short Black boy with a poofy green mohawk stumbled out. He was wearing a big red shirt, cargo shorts, and a jean jacket covered in pins.

"Are you talking about Silent Woods without me?" he shouted gleefully, running down the aisle to his seat across from me. I hadn't even noticed the messenger bag that was sitting there.

"I was only answering their questions about where we're going," Abigail reassured him with a warm smile. "You still have lots of juicy details to give them, Ripley."

"Why don't we wait until we pick up the other three campers?" Jason said from the first row.

"Sure," Ripley agreed disappointedly.

Genette gave me a suspicious look, but didn't speak up.

We drove for a long time without stopping. Genette and I kept to ourselves. We tried to play cards, but it ended up being a game of 52 pick up. Abigail and Jason were quiet. Ripley had this big, messy book that he was looking through ponderously. Occasionally he mumbled to himself, but I couldn't make out any words. His voice ranged between sounding like he had a

bad cold and squeaking with voice cracks.

When the sun was high in the sky, we pulled into the driveway of a big, new house. It had a big, new car, and I could even see a big, new boat bobbing with the gentle tide at the edge of their huge backyard. They had a dock right on the lake. I wondered how much this property cost. The figures made my head spin.

We had a good amount of land here in Ontario, but that's only because we had lived here for so long. We were doing better than we would've been if we lived in the north with my relatives, but we were still poor. My aunts, uncles and cousins ran a small tour company in Nunavut, but it was hard for them without their parents, my uncle, and my mother. Uncle John couldn't move back in with them now, since we relied on him. In America, things had been different, in many ways, but we still struggled to get by. Needless to say, Genette and I hadn't known this kind of money. Not by a long shot.

For the first time, I was hit with real and valid fear about this camp. If these kids were as rich as this house made them seem, they'd be cruel to us for sure. They'd see the holes in my shoes and the tears in my pants, the patches sewn onto my shirts to keep them together. They'd see Genette's second hand wardrobe. They'd see our bad teeth. They'd see that we weren't given any money for the trip. What would they think of us? Worse, what would they do about it?

Chapter Five (Ava)

When the bus arrived at noon exactly, we were all sitting on the front lawn. All of our bags were in a pile in the driveway. It had been quite the task to get them down the spiral staircase.

A burly guy with rust-colored hair came out from the bus, waving us over.

"Hey, I'm your counselor, Jason. Nice to meet you all." He opened up the undercarriage. "Want some help with your bags?"

Henry hauled all his things over by himself, bragging to nobody about how he didn't need help. He told Jason his name like he was very important.

Gwen clung to Aileen's side while I put both of our bags away, accepting Jason's help.

"Make sure to say bye to Alan for me," Gwen told Aileen. "And Cole. I'll miss you guys."

"It's okay sweetie, you'll only be gone for a month. We're still gonna be here when you get back."

When we finally loaded onto the bus and drove away, Gwen was crying quietly. She let me introduce her on her behalf, taking a seat behind the boy with the green hair. I sat across from her.

"We'll be at camp in about forty-five minutes," Jason told us as he took his seat at the front.

"Finally," the lanky, pale, wild-haired girl in front of me groaned.

"Oh, stop, it's not that long." Henry rolled his eyes, collapsing into the seat in front of her.

"You haven't been sitting here in this hot bus for hours with nothing to eat!"

"What, did that one already eat your snacks?" He gestured to the boy leaning over the back of her seat, sorting a deck of cards.

The girl's face twisted into an angry snarl. "Don't say that about my brother."

"Yeah, Henry, nobody wants to hear you talk," I snapped at him before quickly ducking my head to look at my phone like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

The girl roared with laughter. She turned her back on him, going back to her brother's card game.

"How about we introduce ourselves instead of fighting?" Jason said in a mock-polite tone.

"Yeah, you guys. We're going to be working together for a whole month. This kind of toxic behavior isn't going to make that easy," a portly girl with a long red braid added.

"It's not like we want to be here," Henry grumbled.

"Maybe not you," the boy he'd insulted said curtly.

The redhead eyed Henry quietly before telling us pleasantly, "I'm Abigail. I'm your second counselor."

Henry scowled. "I'm Henry, the household menace," he said, mocking something Gwen had called him before.

The girl in front of me fanned her hand of cards in front of her face. "My name's Genette."

"I'm Sid," her little brother said shyly.

My face flushed dark red when everyone looked at me. "Ava,"

I mumbled before looking right back down.

"I'm Gwen," my sister squeaked across the aisle. "Nice to meet you."

The green-haired boy sat bolt upright with a big, bright smile. "I'm Ripley! Nice to meet you too. Abigail and I went here last year so we know each other, and we had a great time. I'm so excited to tell you all about where we're going…"

Jason chuckled. "Slow down a bit. You don't want to overwhelm them. Besides, we've got to go over what Abigail, Shebal, and I have planned for the camp." He cleared his throat. "So, as you might have been told, our camp is about bringing people together and uplifting youth who are going through hardships in some area of their life. We're also going to be learning important life skills in… Different ways then you'd probably expect. Overall, though, the camp is about enjoying yourself, understanding your place in the world, and growing as a person," he said, then added with a sort of awkward smile, "but we won't be marking you, don't worry."

Abigail leaned forward to speak. "Aside from being an alternative way to develop skills," she said, "Shimmering Lake Summer Camp is a unique place through and through. You're going to be exposed to a lot of things and ideas you wouldn't normally have. Our goal is to show you that the magic the world has to offer is right in front of you, and that there are out of the ordinary things all around you… But especially here, in Silent Woods."

I noticed Ripley suppress a giggle.

"What do you mean, especially here?" Gwen asked nervously.

Abigail winked. "You'll see."

Ripley grinned. "We're almost there… Can't you feel it?"

When he said that, I did feel something, like goosebumps

and the surreal feeling of waking up but still dreaming. That must have been in my head, though. Nobody else reacted, so it probably was.

Soon, the road brought us close enough to a lake that I could see the prismatic shimmers of the water from Gwen's window. It must be the camp's lake, with the way it shimmered and shone in the bright afternoon sun. We passed a small shop with a yard full of canoes and fishing rods. It was built right next to a jutting outcrop of land, overlooking the lake. On that outcrop there was an incredibly large man with long black hair. He was arranging and rearranging a series of thick wooden poles with spiked ends, trying to make the skeleton of a large tent.

"See that guy?" Jason said. "That's my friend, Big Gus. He runs the shop with his husband. We'll go check it out later today. Our last session didn't find much time to see them, but I'd like you to get acquainted with them. They're good people."

"Yeah, he's really cool," Ripley added excitedly, but he seemed to be cutting himself short.

As we drove along the shore, only a sparse strip of trees between us and the water, I could see two islands only meters apart in the big lake. One had a long, rickety bridge going to it from our shore. It was heavily forested on one half, with the side facing Big Gus's shop cleared for the handful of buildings. One looked like it used to be a cute little house, one was a long, low building with big windows, and the other four were barely visible from my seat. Between the two islands, there was a series of large, flat rocks poking up from the shallow water, stepping stones making a natural bridge to the second island.

That island was much bigger. It had a dense forest that crept right to the shoreline, thick with brush and short trees. In the middle, there was one unbelievably massive tree. Its long,

sturdy boughs stretched out in all directions. From here, I could faintly see shapes moving among them, and things hanging from them. I rubbed my eyes and squinted, trying to figure out what exactly I was seeing.

"I missed this place," Ripley whispered.

"Me too," Abigail said with a sigh. "Do you think we can trust Shebal and his husband to have cleaned it up while we were gone?"

Jason snickered. "I wouldn't, but I did check before setting out this morning. It's all good. His little sister is attending this year, too."

Ripley's eyes brightened. "The lion girl?"

Jason nodded.

"Lion girl?" Sid echoed.

Ripley flapped his hands, smiling brightly. "Yeah, she's a lion! I met her and her family last year."

"What do you mean, she's a lion?"

Jason interrupted. "You'll get to meet her in a minute. We're getting off now."

The bus rumbled to a stop by the bridge. We all stood up and got off, Henry making sure he was the first one, behind Jason. As I turned to thank the driver, I realized there was nobody in the seat.

Outside, as we all got our bags, I looked around for an extra person. When I'd gotten my things, I asked Jason where the driver was.

He smiled, but he looked sort of nervous, like a student who was presenting but they weren't quite ready. "There's no driver. The bus runs all on its own."

My eyes widened. "How does that work? Like, a smart car or something?"

He made the hand sign for so-so.

"Doesn't look like a smart car," Henry piped up, slamming the undercarriage shut. "Looks like a piece of junk."

The bus's engine made a deep, rusty noise, almost like a growl. Henry stumbled back as it abruptly pulled away. He watched, dumbfounded, as it drove down the road.

"Now you've gone and upset it," Ripley said, exasperated.

Abigail just walked off to the bridge. "Come on, guys. You don't want to be standing out here, the bugs will get you."

I took as many bags as I could safely carry, following her. Henry took all of his again. He struggled visibly, but he wouldn't let anyone help him. Halfway across the bridge, he lost his grip on a suitcase. It slid forward on the slick wood before flopping onto its side and slipping under the railing. He swore loudly and tried to catch it with his foot, but he couldn't. I whipped around in time to see a dark shape under the water where it was going to land. The suitcase launched back onto the bridge, completely dry.

Henry and I stared at it for a moment. I wasn't sure what had just happened. The shape was gone from the water. There was nothing around to tell me what I had seen had been real, so the darkness could have been the shadow of the bag, and maybe Henry had caught it with his foot, but…

"Why don't you make yourself useful and carry that for me?" Henry snapped, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I wanted to kick it back into the lake, but I just sighed loudly and carried the bag to the beach for him.

On the sandy shore, I could see the other four buildings were cabins: little wooden buildings with slanted roofs and hanging lanterns by the doors. In the middle of the cleared area, there was a fire pit with stripped log seats around it.

I threw Henry's bag down before arranging mine into a nice pile. Out from the building with large windows, two people came to join us. One was a man who looked a bit younger than Jason, with long, wavy white hair and dark, freckled skin. He was wearing swimming trunks and a yellow tank top. The girl beside him looked almost exactly like him, but her skin was more brown, and she wore a red hijab and baggy jeans. She stood awkwardly and watched us almost cautiously, like a nervous cat.

As they approached, the rest of the group walked off the bridge behind me. Jason went back for the rest of our bags so we could get settled and introduce ourselves.

"Hello," the man said, sweeping his hair over his shoulder. "My name is Shebal. I'll be your counselor for the summer. This is my little sister, Hafsa."

"The lion girl," Gwen murmured, shuffling closer to me.

Hafsa blushed and looked at her feet, but Shebal didn't seem to hear the comment.

Shebal clasped his hands together and smiled. "Well, let's get you to your cabins. Jason, Abigail and I will be sleeping in that one," he pointed to the biggest one, which stood alone, "and you will take two of the three campers' cabins. We're going to divide you by age."

Jason returned and set our things down, brushing his short, fluffy hair from his face.

"Why can't we choose our own cabins?" Henry complained.

"Because the age differences between you are much more than they were last year," Jason explained.

"That means you do get to choose your cabins," Shebal added, "just not who you'll be sharing them with. Think of it as a way to make friends. So! Can I have Gwen and Sid come up here

with my sister, please? You'll be together."

My sister reluctantly took her bags up to stand not too close to the two of them. Sid followed more willingly, waving at them. Gwen stared at her shoes, not responding.

"Shouldn't this kid be up with them?" Henry said loudly, pointing at Ripley.

"I'm sixteen," he protested, but Henry ignored him.

"He's only a year younger than you," Shebal said.

"No way," Henry laughed. "Look at him."

"That's inappropriate to say, Henry. Be respectful," Abigail said.

Henry muttered something under his breath.

"The rest of you go together. Pick your cabins." Shebal turned and stalked back to the building that he came from.

Jason crossed his arms and told us in a conflicted voice that dinner would be at six, but we were welcome to go down to the shop if we were hungry now, and that the rest of the day was ours to relax and set up our things.

Henry stomped off to the middle cabin, dragging his things carelessly. Genette and Ripley followed me, a lot calmer. Inside the cabin, there were four beds, each with a solid black curtain around them for privacy. Right beside the door, there was a single bed, with another single bed diagonally across the room. In the other back corner there was a bunk bed. The fourth corner had a little table and a cooler, which were empty, Genette discovered. The door on that wall led to a narrow, but long bathroom, with a deep tub that doubled as a shower. Both rooms had one light in the middle of the ceiling, and when we shut the door, the low hum of air conditioning came from a vent at the back of the room, right under a small window.

I quickly took the bed by the door, putting my bags on the

floor beside it. Ripley shot to the bottom bunk, unzipping his suitcase immediately.

"I slept here last year," he said, unpacking his clothes and putting them in the drawer under the bed.

Nobody responded. I put my clothes into the drawers under my bed, then put a couple CDs and my Discman on top of the nightstand.

Henry looked between the two available beds, shaking his head. "There's no way I'm sleeping here. I can't get far enough away from this freak," he gestured vaguely at Genette, who was starting to climb up to the top bunk.

"At least I won't be on the same level as you," she sneered from the ladder. "I don't trust you."

He glared at her and muttered, "You shouldn't."

"What's wrong with me anyway?"

"You smell like you live in a garbage dump. You look like it too. When was the last time you washed your hair?"

"What kind of insult is that?" She hauled her bags up to the bed, opening the drawers that were set into the wall. "You've gotta get a better hobby than picking on people."

He flopped onto his bed so hard that the frame creaked. Taking off his shoe, he said, "I do have one. I hunt. And I'd warn you to watch your back, but you've probably got something with eyes in those mats on your head."

"Shut up about my hair," she growled, slamming the drawer shut.

"Don't tell me to shut up!" He whipped his shoe at her back. It hit her with a loud smack.

She whirled around and launched it back at him, swearing at him.

They yelled at each other for thirty seconds straight, each of

them getting progressively more ready to get up and physically fight. Ripley had withdrawn into the cavern of his bed, shaking and rocking.

"Guys," I said, loudly, trying to get their attention. I was scared of what was happening with Ripley. I'd seen Gwen act similarly, especially when Henry and I fought. I didn't want him to hurt himself.

They didn't listen to me.

"Stop," Ripley mumbled, trying to sit up straight. "Please. Stop."

They still weren't listening.

I watched his body strain, like he wanted to do so many different things but couldn't. Suddenly, in an almost violent action, he clasped his hands over his ears and screamed wordlessly. Henry and Genette froze. Then the cabin was finally quiet, the only sound being the hum of the air conditioning.

"Can you please. Stop. Yelling?" Ripley said at a reasonable volume, but his voice shook.

They both stayed silent for several long seconds. Ripley apologized tearfully and rushed to the washroom with his towel. The door closed very slowly, shutting with a soft click, and moments later, the shower was running.

"Now look what you've done," Henry barked.

"Don't yell," Genette said, upset but not loud. "I don't even want to hear you talk."

"Nobody does," I added, turning my back on him to finish making my bed.

That was how it remained for the duration of Ripley's shower. We were pretty much done unpacking by the time he came out, dressed in the same clothes, shaking out his hair from being compressed by his shower cap. He looked a lot better now

and spoke in a chipper tone, saying he felt silly for being so far behind in getting ready.

"Don't worry about it, bud," Genette said, leaning over the small fence around her bed. "Want some help?"

He shook his head, fixing up his bedding.

"Why don't you tell us what you were gonna say on the bus?" I offered, sitting on my bed and hugging my legs. "Something about where we are?"

He looked up at me, surprised and even a little taken aback. "I'm glad that you wanna hear," he said, a little sheepish. "I was kinda feeling like you didn't have time for my silly stories…"

"I'm sure they're not silly," I encouraged him.

He gave me a mischievous smile. "Well, they're not really stories either… They're all true."

"Quit stalling, I wanna hear," Genette said from above him.

He laughed and sat down on his bed. "Well, let's start with where we are. Have any of you heard of Shimmering Lake, before the camp?"

None of us answered, so he took that as no.

"I thought so. That's because we're not in the Ontario that you know, not quite. We're in Silent Woods. Still in Ontario, but also not entirely in the world we have our houses in. A long, long time ago, the world divided itself into two parts: the Outside world, where we live, and secret places like this, where mythological creatures, folklore, and extinct and endangered species can stay safely away from destruction. Like a magical sanctuary."

Genette looked concerned, crossing her arms on top of the barrier on the side of her bed. Henry reclined on his bed, propped up against the back wall. He looked like he wanted to say something, but I think the idea of Ripley screaming

again was keeping him at bay. I gave him a fierce look anyway, wanting him to know I wouldn't tolerate him being a jerk. I didn't give much mind to what Ripley was saying. Fantasy wasn't for me, really. But if Henry was going to bully anyone this summer, I knew this outgoing young boy would be his target. As his more mature sister, I was going to keep him in line. Or at least I would try.

"I've always believed in this place, and in all the things that live here," Ripley went on, putting some framed photos on his nightstand, "but I know lots of people don't. Maybe you don't even trust me right now. You probably think I'm telling a story, right?"

"I don't," Genette blurted. "I mean, I don't think this is a story. Not really."

He stepped back to look up at her. "Really?"

She paused before nodding. "Grandma tells us these kinds of things."

Henry crowed, "You believe in fairytales? Of course you do. That's rich."

Genette flipped him off, sinking back into her bed.

I shot him an angry look. He stuck his tongue out at me.

Ripley sighed and continued. "Well, I can prove to you that this is all real. Last summer, there was only one island in this lake. The second island had been pulled underwater by the lakefellows, because they were angry at the catfolk for accusing them of killing Shebal, the Prince of the Catfolk."

"Now you're just saying nonsense," Henry interrupted.

"I'm not," Ripley said, edging on upset, "but I'll explain. The lakefellows are a race of people who live in this lake. The catfolk live on the second island. They've been at war for several years, until last summer, when we helped Shebal go back to his family

and reunite the displaced catfolk who were hiding on our island with the ones still on the sunken island. We convinced the two sides to come together in peace, and the island was raised."

Henry rolled his eyes. "And you all lived happily ever after. I get it."

"No, really. I watched the island coming out of the water. It was… Truly breathtaking."

"I believe you," Genette said softly from above.

"Me too," I said, mostly as a way to get Henry to not rag on the two of them. I wasn't sure where I stood on this. It was an interesting concept, but the real world was made of people who brought pain and destruction to other people's lives. If this magical sanctuary existed for real, keeping endangered people and creatures safe from harm and extinction, how had nobody discovered this place before and exploited it? It didn't make sense to me. Too many bad people could get their hands on a beautiful place like this.

Ripley looked so deeply touched and relieved. He went on to tell us how he'd met the King of the Catfolk and been there for the marriage ceremony of Shebal and his lakefellow husband, Gownik. He meekly told us that he'd personally influenced the decision to be at peace.

"Abigail helped me," he concluded. "She's able to calm animals, so she kept them from being biased and angry when I spoke by appealing to their feline sides."

"That's really cool," Genette said warmly. "I think Sid will like you a lot, dude."

He smiled awkwardly, returning to arranging his toys on his bed. The conversation seemed to be over, so I retreated into my thoughts. It wasn't long before Henry was squawking again, though.

"What's in the bag that's so important we can't touch it?"

"It's none of your business," Ripley said defensively, standing in the bathroom door. "Medical things."

"What kind of medical things? Do you have drugs in there? I'm going to report you."

"You can't report me. Shebal and Jason know about this."

"So it is drugs."

"I didn't say that!"

As Henry reached out to grab the plastic bag from Ripley's arms, Genette flew down the ladder like a wild animal. She yanked on the collar of his shirt and threw him back like he was a naughty puppy.

I gawked, unable to move. I didn't want her to hurt my brother, but…

"If he says it's not your business, it's not your business," she seethed. "Leave him alone or I will throw you and your things into the lake."

"Get your hands off me," he snapped, struggling away from her. He just looked at her angrily for a moment before storming out of the cabin.

Shaken, Ripley rustled the bag as he looked inside, making sure the contents were safe.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly, getting up from my bed.

He looked like he was going to cry, but nodded.

"I'm sorry he's so terrible. He's always like that." I hugged my arms. "Do you want me to keep that bag with my things, so he doesn't find it?"

He shook his head, but didn't look like he meant it.

"It's okay. He won't go through my things, I promise. I won't ask about the bag either."

Pensive, he studied me and my bed. After a minute, he

extended his arms to me, letting me take the bag. I hid it in the bottom drawer of my nightstand, making sure he saw and approved. I offered to give him a hug, but he declined. He hid in his bed, constructing a curtain for his area with bulldog clips and a sheet.

When Genette went up to her bed too, I was left alone with my thoughts. Curling up and closing my curtain, I tried to clear my head.

If what Ripley said about this place was true, this was going to be a wild summer. If it wasn't… It may be even worse.

Chapter Six (Sid)

Things were weird at dinner. The building with the tall windows was huge and empty, and we were so few people, we couldn't fill all the tables. We split ourselves between three, with the counselors at one. Genette and I let Ripley and Hafsa sit with us, and the three siblings sat together at the other table. From Genette's stories about how the two older siblings acted around each other, that made no sense to me. Sure, Genette and I had our disagreements, but we weren't at each other's throats over any little thing. I loved my big sister, and I knew she loved me.

Jason and Abigail went into the kitchen at the back to help Shebal, who had been cooking. We had to go up to this big service window to get our plates and cups. Dinner was burgers with our choice of orange juice or apple juice.

As we ate, the counselors encouraged us to talk about ourselves to our cabinmates. To do this, they talked about themselves. Jason said he built his own house not too far from here, and helped build the buildings at camp. Abigail told us about her farm that she owned along with her parents, and how she worked with her border collie to keep their livestock in line.

"For the most part, they listen to me, even if he's not around,"

she said.

Shebal had a devious look on his face when it was his turn to speak. "I'm not sure how many of you will believe this," he said, "but my home was underwater for the better part of a month last year."

Across the table, Ripley giggled and Hafsa looked surprised. Across the room, though, Henry and Ava seemed uncomfortable. I gave Genette a questioning look, but she was busy eating. I wondered how intentional that was.

Ripley jumped at the opportunity to talk about himself, sitting up straight and radiating confidence. "I'm studying cryptozoology and elusive wildlife with the intention of preserving our fleeting natural spaces, especially untouched havens like Silent Woods."

I found myself smiling. He was so cool and sure of himself. He must have his whole life figured out. Even though his interests were mysterious, he was like an open book, so put together, he was an invitation to a wonderful journey and I couldn't help but to want to know more.

"I'm a hunter," Henry said loudly, his heavy, steel toed boots making quite the bang as they hit the floor. "I know how to gut a deer, how to set a bear trap, and how to shoot both crossbows and guns."

Ava shoved him. "Don't be a creep," she said. Sighing, she mumbled that she can do all of that and more because she knows how to fish, and unlike Henry, she's not afraid of the water.

"I'm n—" he tried to protest, but Gwen cut him off.

"You're both being creeps," she squeaked. She crossed her arms and scooted away from them before telling us that she's trying to learn how to cook, make clothing, and to understand other languages.

"I wanna make my own clothes too," Genette said, giving Gwen an easy smile. "I like bugs and exploring more than anything, though."

"I like exploring too," I mumbled, "and animals, and stories."

Ripley looked excited by what I said, but I figured I was seeing what I wanted to see. He seemed excited by everything.

Hafsa, the last to speak, cheekily said, "I'm a princess," then went right back to her food.

I studied her quietly as Jason said something about how we're all unique and interesting people and he's sure we'll get along. Hafsa, too, was mysterious, even more so than Ripley. She was confident in herself and she knew she belonged here. She had this air of independence without detachment, intelligence without arrogance. I wanted, a lot more than I'd admit, to get to know her.

After we ate, Shebal explained that the curfew was ten and we had to stay in our own cabins past then, but if we needed something, we could go see him, Jason, or Abigail. He dismissed us with the promise of fun activities starting tomorrow after breakfast.

In my cabin, I climbed up the ladder to the top bunk, Gwen played on her phone in her bed by the door, and Hafsa flopped down onto her bed, diagonal from Gwen's. Looking down at them both, I worked up the courage to speak.

"What did you mean by what you said in there, Hafsa?" I asked, my voice shaking a bit when she rolled over to look up at me.

She smirked. "I mean I'm a princess."

I tilted my head questioningly.

"My dads are the Kings of the Catfolk," she explained, but that offered more questions than answers.

"You have two dads?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah I have two dads, what about it?" she said, sounding offended.

She looked honestly confused. "Who are your real parents?"

"My dads." She was getting angry now. "Why is this hard for you to get? Hurrem and Morcair and my dads, nobody else are my parents. That's all there is to it."

Gwen looked like she might cry. "I've just never heard of two guys having a kid," she whispered shakily.

She took a breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Nobody's been confused about this before is all. Being transgender is normal with my people, and with the lakefellows, and I've never met humans before."

Gwen's face went as white as a sheet. "What do you mean?"

Hafsa scowled. "Being transgender is normal," she repeated. "That means if people say you're a boy or a girl when you're born, but you're not, then that's fine, and vice versa."

Gwen looked up at me like she needed advice. I was too stunned to speak, though, or really understand why. One of Hafsa's dads is trans. Like me. But an adult, with a family, and a future…

"I didn't mean…" Gwen tried to get the words out. "I meant, you said… You've never met a human before?"

Hafsa's eyes widened and she blushed. "Oh! Oh no, I'm sorry. I thought… Nevermind. Yeah. I've never met… I mean I have, but I've never really been friends with humans before."

"But you… Are a human."

She was earnestly confused. "No I'm not, I'm a catfolk."

"What?"

Hafsa opened her mouth then closed it again. She looked thoughtful and serious for a moment before a soft yellow light

covered her body. In only a few seconds, there was no girl sitting on the bed; instead, a large adolescent lion lazed on her blankets. She was a sandy yellow color with tufts of black mane fur coming in. Her eyes were Hafsa's own: steady, warm, dark brown.

Gwen was too frozen in fear to react. I blinked a few times, trying to focus on what I was seeing. I had been distracted by the idea of growing up trans and had kind of missed the discussion leading up to this, so seeing this whole, real lion in her bed made my brain short circuit a little.

With another burst of yellow light, Hafsa was back.

"See? I am the lion girl."

Gwen covered her mouth for a moment, then said, "Wow."

"I figured you all knew," Hafsa said shyly, adjusting her shirt. "I don't remember who said it, but one of you made a comment about me being the lion girl, and Shebal did say we're going to be open about things, so…"

Gwen shook her head slowly. "No… No. I don't really know what's going on," her voice squeaked as she got noticeably more stressed.

Hafsa explained that her family, and the rest of her kingdom, lived on the second island in the lake. She also briefly mentioned that she'd been displaced from her home for a bit last summer, but didn't want to talk about it, and that everything was back to normal now. It was fixed because of her brother marrying one of the lakefellows, and because Ripley and Abigail had helped her father see the reason in the choice to stop the war between their people. At Gwen's request, she told us that the lakefellows were people who lived in the lake, and we'd probably get to meet one or two.

It was fully clicking that this was real, but somehow I wasn't

as shocked as Gwen. Maybe she was being shocked for me, or maybe it was my secret devotion to the stories I read, and the things Grandma told me, passed on from my maternal grandmother and Fran's family too. Maybe I really wanted this to be happening, maybe I had been waiting my whole life to find this. Wonder and fantasy no longer existed in my peripheral, and I couldn't use shyness as an excuse to not cross the forbidden line. I tried to hide a big smile.

Gwen went quiet, like she was trying to work this all out in her mind. Hafsa, awkwardly, told her to take her time.

After a few long moments, Gwen said, "So… You're a lion, and Shebal's your brother. Is he a lion too?"

She shook her head. "He's a tiger."

"So your parents are a lion and a tiger?"

"A lion and a puma."

"But… Is he adopted?" Her eyes widened.

"No," she sighed. "We're their biological kids. My dad has darker skin than me, but his hair is thick and he wears it in dreads like I used to, but my father has lighter skin and wavy hair like my brother. In our human bodies we take after our parents. Our cat bodies don't take after anything but our own personalities."

Gwen nodded, her eyebrows still knitted together and her lip still trembling. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"It's alright… Just please stop implying that they're not our dads."

Gwen swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to." She pulled at her hair nervously. "I'm sorry, this is gonna be another dumb question, but aren't your parents Arabic? Since you are?"

She paused for a second. "I'm… Not Arabic. I'm Muslim. And we're just catfolk."

She apologized again, but took a quick, steadying breath and nodded. "Thank you for telling me all this. I'm sorry I'm acting so scared, it's just… Conflict stresses me out a lot. It's not about what we're talking about so much as I'm scared of getting in trouble, but I'm sorry that I'm sounding ignorant."

"It's really okay, Gwen. I don't want to scare you. I'm not used to being questioned about who I am, but that's what we're here to do, to learn, I guess. I'm happy to teach you if you'll be good about it. But you don't help either of us by being scared." She frowned. "It actually makes it harder for me, because it feels like you're guilt tripping me or something."

Gwen nodded again, running her hands through her long hair. "I understand, I'm sorry. And I'd like that. And I'd also like to be your friend."

Hafsa laughed. "Of course, I wouldn't want it any other way." She then glanced up at me and cheerfully added, "You're my friend too, Sid. Don't think I'm ignoring you just because you're not participating!"

I blushed and laughed nervously. "Okay. I mean, um, you're my friend too. And Gwen. And thank you for telling me about, um—"

She raised her hand to let me stop rambling. "It's alright."

Gwen giggled, smiling at us both.

"Now do you have any other questions?" Hafsa asked. "Either of you?"

Gwen shook her head.

I got stuck trying to figure out how to make this a nice question, so I just blurted, "Your dad is trans?"

She froze. "My father is, yes, I think I went over that pretty well."

My face went very hot. "I'm trans too," I murmured, "is why

I'm asking…"

Relief passed over her face. "Oh, that's cool. Were you introduced with the right pronouns?"

As I nodded, I felt a numb, but warm shock fill my body. She was so okay with it. She was so casual about it. I mean, I didn't reasonably expect anything different, but it was so refreshing compared to what I feared would happen.

"Me too," she added, again, so casually.

I smiled and nodded, but I didn't say anything in fear of sounding dumb. The conversation sort of stopped there, so we went about our own business, settling in for the evening. But as soon as I saw Hafsa was unoccupied, I slipped down the ladder and sat on the lower bunk.

"Hey, Hafsa?"

She looked up as she finished putting together her outfit for tomorrow. "What's up?"

I realized I'd been thinking a lot about this talk, but not about how to start it. "I, um, I've never really met another trans person before, living out in the country and all."

She waited for me to continue, her face neutral.

"It's just cool to finally meet someone else like me!"

She smiled. "Yeah."

Blush crept across my face. "There's not a lot of trans… Trans humans, I guess, I mean there are but it's not as accepted. Not everywhere at least. Not where I live. In the cities I'm sure it is, but I wouldn't know. My family supports me, but it's hard at school."

"It's hard at my school too," she said. She didn't seem to mind that I was being so awkward.

"You go to school?"

She laughed a little. "Yes, I go to school in Ottawa. I stay

with a family there, a Muslim family. They're humans… So I guess I am friends with humans, but these ones are different. They were born in Silent Woods. I go to a regular public school, though."

"And you don't have any friends there," I said.

"Yeah."

"Same here."

She sighed. "It's tough, huh?"

I nodded. "Kids are really cruel. I'm Inuk, and I'm fat, and my family situation is complicated, so they have a lot to get at me for, even before finding out I'm trans." I looked down at my feet for a moment. "I don't mean to complain, though. It must be harder for you."

"Why, because I'm the lion girl?" She laughed. "Don't think of it that way, it's not a competition. We all have our own struggles."

Feeling awkward, I didn't know what to say to that. She was right, though. I took a deep breath and changed the subject, asking about her family.

"Well, as I said, my dads are the Kings, so I'm the princess. My brother got married first, but it was to a lakefellow… That's never happened before, marrying out to a different species. We either marry in our own community, or find someone from a different catfolk community, and it's up to the couple where they end up living. My father, Hurrem, is from a different community. He moved here. We were all expecting my big sister Temmey to marry someone first so we don't really know what the future holds for our community now. But I guess it's the same for the Lakefellows." She shrugged. "Sorry, that probably wasn't the answer you were looking for."

"No no, I'm interested," I assured her. "Could your brother

and his partner not just be married, and Temmey can take over for your dads when she gets married?"

"That's not traditional."

I smiled sheepishly. "I don't think much is traditional at the moment."

She laughed. "Yeah, you've got that right. Honestly I don't know what they're gonna do. Shebal and Gownik might become our Kings, but not change rank in the Lakefellows; their society works more like a big group of friends without a leader. They have hunters, guards, traders, and crafters. Everyone is taken care of and choices are made based on each individual's needs."

"That sounds really good," I said.

She nodded. "I think it works, yeah, but we're different. Our Kings, or Queens, or Monarchs, they make choices about things like where and when we hunt, if we go to other communities for education, who learns how to fight or how to build or how to heal, when and who we fight… Sometimes they even decide if we're allowed to leave the community for good or not. My dads are pretty laid back about that one, and about leaving in general, but there are still rigid rules to follow." She looked serious. "I wasn't supposed to show you my other body. It's okay here, because Shebal convinced them to decide to be open at camp… Mostly because of what happened last summer. But no matter what, I have to stay in this body outside of Silent Woods."

"Even when you're completely alone?"

She nodded again. "Even then. Who knows who could be watching, it's not safe. I'd be putting myself, my community, and the whole of Silent Woods in danger. Even though this place tends to protect itself, it's not immune to everything."

Gwen, who had been listening quietly from her bed, asked softly, "What if somebody saw you here and told people when they left?"

Hafsa's eyes darkened. She didn't answer for a while. "That could be dangerous…"

I looked over at Gwen, alarmed. "Do you mean…?"

She swallowed hard, looking afraid.

I stood up. I didn't think Ripley was that immature, but if these two were that scared, I had to make sure.

"Where are you going?" Gwen asked.

"I'll be back, it's okay," I said as I rushed out the door. Moments later, I returned with Ripley. He was happy to come and hang out with us.

Gwen looked puzzled. "Why did you bring him over? I meant my brother!"

Ripley flinched. "I'm sorry, I'll…"

"No, no, stay," she said quickly, almost looking like she'd burst into tears. "I'm sorry. I meant, I, Henry would tell—"

Hafsa cleared her throat. "I'll explain. Ripley, you're fine, come sit," she gestured to the bottom bunk.

He sat quickly and I sat beside him.

"We were just talking about how the Woods protects itself," she said, crossing her legs and sitting up straight. "I was saying that it's forbidden for me to appear in my other body outside of Silent Woods, and it's only okay at the camp with strangers because we're being open."

"And last summer."

"Yes," she said curtly before carrying on, "but Gwen mentioned something." She glanced at Gwen.

"Oh! Uh, what if… What if somebody sees here and then tells people after the camp," she repeated. "That's what I said."

My cheeks got hot. "And I thought you meant Ripley…"

Gwen's face was full of despair. "I meant Henry, I'm sorry."

Hafsa cut me off before I could apologize. "No need for sorries, either of you."

Ripley giggled. "I get it. I'm sorry too, I don't mean to come off as someone who'd endanger the Woods, but I know it can be hard to trust someone who's an outsider but knows as much as I do. I mean to protect, educate, and preserve." He punctuated each word of his last sentence with a nod.

I apologized to him, making Hafsa roll her eyes, and he told me not to worry about it.

"But I think you don't need to worry, Gwen, about other people talking about this place. Silent Woods protects its own, and those who respect it. If your brother decided to endanger this place in any way, the Woods wouldn't let that happen. Even if he could get someone to believe him, it takes a lot to even get in here if you have the wrong intentions." He smiled. "You don't need to worry about it."

"Thanks, Ripley," she said with a happy sigh. "What did happen last summer, by the way?"

He glanced at Hafsa.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, tell her."

He giggled. "Alright, so it went like this…"

Chapter Seven (Ava)

On the second day, despite the arid heat, we were given a tour of the island. It started right after breakfast with Jason telling us about the buildings: the little one that looked like a house was the storage building, and we were familiar with the rest, he awkwardly explained. Then Shebal warned us about the stony cliff opposite our cabins. He also said to mind our feet around the bridge, as there are water snakes and dock spiders, and all manner of other spooks that could crawl across our toes. He wasn't clear on that, but I figured it was something to do with what Ripley had talked about. Between this and the joke at dinner, I wondered how serious they really were about this.

The path we followed snaked up through the woods from the bank where the bridge was. We trekked up a short, rocky rise and followed a path that wound between the tall, old trees.

"Ripley and Hafsa may have told you already," Shebal said as we walked, "but this place is a sort of… Magical sanctuary, as Ripley likes to put it. Silent Woods is the name of our region, but places like this exist all across the globe. Between natural extinctions and extinctions caused by humankind, as well as expanding urban spaces and the subsequent loss of habitats, the world needed a place to keep its wonders safe. So our home was made."

I furrowed my brow as he spoke. This had to be some kind of story, and Ripley and Hafsa were actors planted with us to get us on board. I figured I should play along, or it wouldn't be as fun for Gwen, Genette, and Sid, who were enticed by his speech. They were gonna get enough flack from my brother, anyway.

"To keep itself and its inhabitants safe, Silent Woods is incredibly hard to find, unless it wants you to be here. That's how we could get here, for the camp, because Jason, Abigail, and myself live here."

"Well, I live on the border," Abigail corrected.

Shebal gave her a nod. "Yes, on the border. There are some places that aren't as absorbed in the nature of this place, but still feel the presence of the Woods and what lives within them. Sometimes, little rifts or doorways into the Woods exist far from large areas like this. Perhaps you've seen something you can't explain in your backyard, or walking down the street. Something beyond the scope of reason. There's a chance it was a gateway. Or someone that walked through one."

We all seemed to be stunned, in our own ways. Nobody was interrupting him, not even Henry. From his face and body language, I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"All of the gateways are connected," Shebal went on as we came to pass a large, lonely rock, bathed in sunlight. "If you walk far enough in any direction in Silent Woods, you have a chance to wander out halfway across the world. It's the choice of the Earth, though. If you're not wanted, you'll be spat out somewhere you belong, and you'll have a hard time getting back. These places are made to keep us safe, as the Earth will protect its own."

Ripley, who had been listening intently with wide eyes, looked

like he was about to clap at the end of Shebal's speech. Instead, he shut the notepad he had been taking notes in and thanked him graciously.

Jason also thanked him, coming in off the side of the path with a stick he was fiddling with. "I'm impressed with how well you're all taking this. I thought for sure that, not being from here, you'd have some difficulty accepting things. But it's great to know that you're all on board… This year, we're going to be as open as possible with you. We'll teach you the usual leadership and personal growth skills that you signed up for, and how to fish, forage, identify wildlife, and all that fun stuff. But we're going to be openly addressing where we are. You'll get to know all about extinct and theoretically mythical species firsthand."

As though it was called by Jason's words, a large, gray pigeon flew down from a nearby oak tree, rustling the branches with his departure. His neck and chest were glittery bronze and he had black spots on his wings.

"Is that a passenger pigeon?" Genette whispered to her brother.

We all stood still as it puttered around the roots of the tree, picking at grubs and acorns. Then, with a quiet coo, it flew away toward the lake.

After a long moment, Genette said, "That probably wasn't a passenger pigeon."

"Yes," Jason said, "it was. Like Shebal said, there are extinct animals here, kept safe."

Henry dug the toe of his sneaker into the dirt, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his worn jeans. Ripley hurriedly scribbled down what he saw, speaking under his breath about what he wrote. Gwen, Sid, and Hafsa shared some kind of look

that I couldn't get my head around. Standing on my own with my arms crossed tightly, I couldn't even get my head around my own thoughts. This had to be some kind of play. Or a joke, if they were gonna be really mean about it.

"And you're sure we're allowed to be here?" Genette asked quietly, the emotion in her voice intense but indistinct.

Jason smiled patiently and nodded. "We would have already known if you weren't. The Woods don't like people who would endanger it."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Henry was on his phone.

"What are you doing?" I said, shuffling closer.

He gave me a look that was weirdly honest. "This is screwed up," he said, letting me see that he was texting his school friends about how our camp counselors were nuts, talking about magic and extinct animals in the woods near Toronto.

"You shouldn't do that," I said.

He scowled. "Why not?"

I couldn't find an answer that wasn't just insulting him, but I didn't have to. Abigail came up and told him that he was free to say anything he wanted about this place.

"Yeah, Ava," Henry sneered and sent his text.

I looked at his phone. Immediately, his friends responded, making fun of him for being ridiculous and making things up for attention.

Henry's face changed and I knew what that meant. Fear shot through me before I could say anything. Henry balled his fists and stepped back, dropping his phone, before turning on me. The red anger in his face and the cold shine of his eyes kept me pinned to the spot. My muscles were clamping my bones to the ground and my lungs had stopped screaming for air.

A blur of yellow and black rushed between us. I swore I was

dreaming because an adolescent lion had leaped in front of me, snarling at my brother. Henry stumbled back, pressing his arms to his chest, fists against the sides of his neck. The lion leaned forward, lashing her tail and growling low in her throat.

"Calm down," Shebal said sternly. "Both of you."

The lion cautiously padded backwards a couple steps before being engulfed in a yellow glow. From it came Hafsa, looking just as furious.

My whole body shook. I couldn't hear a thing as I watched Henry looking back and forth between the two of us. He turned and stormed off with a desperate, enraged huff.

Feeling like I'd been hit in the back of the head, I walked blankly to his phone. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands. He needed it, so I hurried after him to return it.

Abigail came up to me and said softly, "Here, give that to me. I'll bring it to him. It's okay."

Listless, I handed it to her and watched her go.

At dinner, nobody spoke of what happened. It was almost as though it wasn't real, but from the looks across the room, I knew something had happened. I could only pray my memory was tricking me.

When we had finished eating, Shebal calmly explained that there is a line of orange rope in the woods cutting our island in half, and we must never cross it.

"Since the spectacle with the second island sinking and raising last summer, wildlife native to this area have returned to the island and the waters, so we mustn't disturb them," he said. "It's been hard enough as it is for them to settle back down. We can't be making it any worse for them. Besides, while none of them will go out of their way to hurt you, wildlife is wildlife and you can't always reliably predict what they'll do. Especially if you

don't have the right training and experience. It's as much for your safety as it is theirs."

Nobody protested. Some kind of cloud hung over us all, and it didn't disperse all through the evening.

Chapter Eight (Sid)

After Hafsa had become a lion to keep Henry from hurting Ava, we had all gotten very quiet. The tour ended abruptly and we were sent on our way. Even though we were allowed to, we didn't talk or hang out. After the bonfire dinner, where the counselors made vague efforts to cheer us up, I went right to bed.

The height of the bunk bed was weird. I'd always slept low to the ground; we could never afford a bed frame or whatever they would be called. I wanted to be up here. It was an interesting and cool change, but tonight, it kept me from falling asleep.

It was definitely just the height. Not the lion below me. Not the fear on Ava's face.

When the keening woke me up in the middle of the night, I hadn't thought I had been sleeping, but the sound came first as a woman screaming in my dream. I jolted awake with a gasp, bumping into the wall. Outside, something was wailing: it didn't sound like a person but it didn't sound like any animal I'd ever heard.

"What is that?" Gwen whimpered, the loops holding her curtain up slinking against the metal rod as she opened it. "You guys are hearing it, right? I'm not just having nightmares?"

"No, I hear it," I mumbled around the gross taste and feeling

in my mouth.

"Are you both up? I wanna turn the light on. Can I turn it on?"

"Go ahead," I said.

Hafsa agreed.

As the light clicked on, I covered my eyes for a moment then slowly let them adjust to the brightness before climbing down the ladder. I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth to get the taste of sleep out of my mouth. Gwen and Hafsa talked in the main room.

"I'm scared."

"It's okay, it's normal."

"What do you mean? Is it one of those lake people you talked about?"

"No. I mean, not the ones I talked about, but it's from the lake and they're people."

Gwen looked afraid. "How many different… Different…?"

"A lot." Hafsa's amused smirk was interrupted by a yawn.

Standing in the doorway, I yawned too. Gwen did as well. Outside, the wailing sounded again.

"This sounds like a kelpie," Hafsa said, tilting her head as though she was straining to hear it better. "Shebal was telling us about that earlier. How last summer had disrupted a lot of the wildlife here, so they're all coming back and having some trouble readjusting."

"Is it in trouble?" Gwen asked immediately. "And, um, what is a kelpie?"

She shook her head. "It's normal, they scream all the time. I don't know why, it's kind of like dogs howling I guess. And they're… Horses, sort of."

"Have you never heard of them?" I blurted.

They both looked at me; I blushed.

Gwen shook her head.

Realizing I had stumbled into having to explain, I stuttered, "They're kind of like horses, like Hafsa said, they… They can make their skin sticky to drag their prey underwater. They live in water, mostly lakes or swamps, but there's one kind that lives in the sea. They trick people into riding them, that's when they drag them under to kill them."

Gwen was horrified. "Why?"

"To eat them," I said, and found myself shuddering when I saw her expression.

"What?" Hafsa broke the short, shocked silence. "Everything has to eat."

"It's not fair," Gwen said. "They don't need to kill people to live, surely."

Hafsa furrowed her brows, sort of angrily. "Are you implying that only humans are people?"

Gwen froze.

Fearing she'd cry, I stepped in. "Humans aren't the only people. This is just how kelpies hunt, same as any other predatory animal."

"It's not the same, they're killing—"

"People," Hafsa growled. "They're all killing people. It is the same."

Gwen was visibly distressed and confused, but didn't say anything.

Hafsa sighed. "I'm going back to bed, there's no reason to be up all night about a harmless kelpie."

"Harmless?" Gwen squeaked.

I hurried to turn off the light for her as she went back to bed. Gwen closed her curtain too, and the bed creaked as she got

back under the covers. I didn't know if I could sleep. I climbed back up, sitting in the darkness for a while. I felt sleep come right up next to me, but as the minutes ticked into hours, I couldn't fall asleep. And the screaming was still there, outside my window, in the water not so far away…

Under my pillow, I found my notebook. I'd brought it to write down what happens here, and how I'm feeling. I'd written about Hafsa, and about Ripley, and seeing the passenger pigeon. Now, on a new page, I wrote about the cries of this kelpie. Somehow, that helped me fall asleep.

At breakfast, I was anxious. We all were. Gwen kept her head down while Ava and Henry ignored each other. Hafsa picked at her pancakes tiredly. I found I wasn't too hungry, either.

Genette gave me a worried look. She was sitting with me today. "You okay?"

I shrugged. "Just thinking."

I put down my fork quickly as Shebal stood up, clearing his throat.

"Everyone," he said, "how was your night? I hope your sleep wasn't too disturbed. As you've probably noticed, the neighbors we have here are sometimes noisy. But that's how it is, in nature. And you have to respect that, as they respect you. So if you hear that sound, or something else like it, you are to stay away from the water, and report it to a counselor."

The only sound in the large, echoey hall was the shuffling of feet under tables and the tapping of utensils on plates.

Shebal looked down for a moment. "Well… Today I have to take care of some important business, but by noon we'll be ready for our first real activity. Any suggestions for what game we should play?"

We voted to play volleyball. We brought our dishes to the

kitchen window where Jason and Abigail washed up, taking Genette in to help. Hafsa asked if Gwen and I wanted to take a walk around the island, so we agreed and went. She brought us past the big rock we'd seen on yesterday's tour, down to a small, pretty beach on the opposite side of the island from the bridge. The sand was clean and golden white, with dozens of pinkish, sparkling seashells all over. It wasn't a very long beach, and scruffy grass grew all around the edges, right up until the slant of the sandy ground into the mouth of the lake. Gwen shyly stepped forward to pick up one of the shells. It was shaped like a fan, with delicate ridges along the top side. Underneath, where the tail of the fan would be, it curled on itself like a conch.

"I've never seen one of these before," she said, turning it over in her hands. "What lives in them?"

"Shimmer crabs," Hafsa answered plainly. "You can see them floating on the surface of the lake in the afternoon and evening. In the morning, they like to come here."

"Oh!" Gwen put the shell right back down. "I didn't think anything would be alive in it."

Hafsa smiled. "They're not all alive, some of the shells are empty." She looked down the beach, then pointed. "Look. That's a good way to tell which ones are alive."

We turned to see a mass of green vines and sludge, about the size of a football, twisting its way along the bank. As more of it slipped out of the water, it seemed to congeal into a gelatinous blob around a cluster of six short vines. It almost looked like an insect, but it was clearly a plant. But it was moving like an insect, too.

"What is that?" I asked.

"An algae mangler," Hafsa said. It really did sound like this was commonplace for her; it probably was, honestly. What a

strange idea.

"Is it a plant or an animal?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh.

We both laughed too, but there was an air of confusion and awe. We watched the creature slide along the beach, staying close to the water. It reached out with the front pair of vines, gripping a shell and flipping it over roughly. One of the vines slipped inside the shell.

"Oh no, it's gonna kill that crab," Gwen cried. "I can't watch."

"Okay, we can go," Hafsa said, hiding the annoyance in her voice with a soft smile. She followed Gwen back up the path, then turned to me. "Are you coming?"

I nodded absently. "I'll catch up."

"Okay, see you."

As they left, the algae mangler noticeably relaxed. It retracted its vine from the shell and put it back down. Then it moved on to the next, and the next. When it finally found an occupied one, its body tensed. It ripped the vine back, and out with it came the crab. It was a small, pinkish creature, sort of a hermit crab, all wrapped in the vine. In seconds, the vine retreated into the algae body and the crab was gone.

A scream split the air. The algae mangler startled and scuttled back into the water. Gwen and Hafsa came crashing back down the path.

"Sid! Sid, we need your help! There's a horse in the water, they're killing it!" Gwen was shouting hysterically.

Hafsa put her hand on her shoulder, only to be violently pushed off. Gwen turned and bolted back. Hafsa looked frantically between us and ordered me to follow her as she ran. I did.

We quickly came to a clearing by the water, where the grassy

land jutted out over the lake. Below the outcrop, there was a wooden stake protruding from the earth, with a long metal wire snaking down from it. Pulled up at a painful angle, held fast around the neck, there was a beautiful strawberry roan horse, writhing and whistling in fear.

"What are you doing?! Let her go!" Gwen cried as she ran up to the top of the outcrop. She hurled a rock down into the water.

Hafsa followed her. "Gwen, stop it," she tried to say, but wasn't heard.

In the water, two people were circling the horse with long driftwood spears. They were people, but they weren't human, even though they looked very similar. Their skin was a pebbly gray, and their long hair was greenish, slick to their skin from the water. Their eyes were like sharp triangles set deep and high on their faces. They had strange mouths, almost like a muzzle, partway between a shark and an otter. They both had a long, eellike tail that twisted behind them, keeping them upright in the water. They spoke in clicks to each other, then turned and barked at Hafsa and Gwen to get away.

Gwen screamed a nasty retort back at them, standing firm.

All the excitement was scaring the mare even more. She keened pitifully, a haunting sound that made everyone stop, even though it wasn't very loud. She stretched her powerful neck, making the line cut deeper into her flesh. Blood trickled into the growing cloud in the water. Her massive flanks heaved with effort, and I could see mud was being churned up by the hooves that could still touch the ground. But she was growing weaker, and fast.

"She's going to die if you keep fighting," I called up to my friends.

Hafsa whipped around. "Don't you think I know that? Gwen is getting in their way!"

"Because they're trying to hurt her!"

"No they're not!" Hafsa grabbed her arm angrily.

Gwen screamed and pushed her away, making her stumble back down the hill. I ran to steady her so she wouldn't fall. The two people in the water took the chance to stab at the outcrop as Gwen fled past us into the forest. Hafsa spent no time worrying about the girl, rushing to the edge of the outcrop, safely out of the way of the spears.

"Oh, no," she said. There was a sound like crumbling earth, then a heavy splash. And that was all.

It took me a moment to find the ability to meet her by the shore. The scene was hard to comprehend: the two people in the water were supporting the large, bleeding body of a mare, whose mouth was too long to be a horse, whose flanks were still, whose breath did not stir the water.

There was nothing to be said. They quietly let her body rest on the bank, nestled in the reeds. They tore the trap out of the outcrop and broke it.

The one who had spoken before looked at us seriously. "If you find any more of these, destroy them. This is unacceptable."

Hafsa nodded. "I'm going to tell my brother too."

They both gave her a firm nod before disappearing under the water and swimming away.

She stood up quickly. I followed her, a little slower, as we walked back to camp. I was worried about Gwen, but didn't want to upset her, so I just dumbly asked who they were.

"Lakefellows," she said, and offered nothing else.

She went right to the counselors' cabin once we had arrived. I went to our cabin, and found Gwen crying on her bed. She

jumped when I came in and tried to hide what she was doing.

"Hey, it's okay, I'm not upset," I said. "It's okay to cry."

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I tried to help. They were hurting her…"

"No, they weren't. They were trying to get her out of the trap," I explained gently. "But it's okay, you were confused but your heart was in the right place. You should apologize to Hafsa, but not right now. She's talking to Shebal… She'll need to calm down, too."

She sniffled. "Are you really not mad at me?"

I nodded. "It's… It's sad, but it's not your fault." I sighed. "It was too late."

A look of utter despair crossed her face, and she sobbed again. I offered to hug her, and she plaintively asked that I didn't.

"I don't like to be touched," she said between sobs.

"It's alright. Anything you need," I said.

"Sit with me?"

I did. In a while, she was better. When Hafsa came back, Gwen apologized immediately. She got a little tearful, but she held herself together pretty well. Hafsa didn't seem very upset anymore.

"It's fine," she said flatly. "Just trust me next time. Don't run into things like that without all the information."

Gwen nodded solemnly.

"I had to tell Shebal. He's not mad, he told me to tell you what I said." She scuffed the floor with her toe. "He's also going to have to talk to the lakefellows about it for a bit, to see what happened, so we'll have to wait an hour or so before we can play volleyball. Abigail's with him, and Jason is making lunch."

"What do you wanna do then?" I asked.

She shrugged.

I suggested we all go outside, so we did. Ripley and Genette were already outside by the fire pit, so I ran over to say hi. Hafsa and Gwen stayed together, then Ava and Henry came out of their cabin. We mingled around and chatted for a while before Henry noticed that Hafsa was sizing up a nearby tree.

"Can you climb?" he asked.

"What?"

He nodded at the tree.

"Oh. Yeah. Why?"

He snorted. "Ava was just saying it was too big for her to climb," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was too big for you, too."

Ava looked confused and annoyed. "Henry, come on—"

"I'll race you," she said, fire in her eyes.

He didn't even say a word before he was running for it.

Determination flashed across Hafsa's face as she sprang after him. She was fast, but he still got there first. He hesitated, finding a foothold as she came up behind him. There was a bright yellow flash and the young lion leaped right over Henry's head, grappling with one of the lower branches. She pulled herself up, shaking out her mane and looking down at us, clearly satisfied.

Angrily, Henry dropped down from where he'd barely started to climb. "That's cheating," he snapped, looking like he wanted to throw something at Hafsa.

"How?" Hafsa snorted. She flicked her tail from side to side.

Hearing her talk as a lion didn't startle Henry, it just made him more mad. "Because it's unfair!"

"Unfair doesn't mean cheating. I didn't break any rules, you just happen to not be able to climb as fast as me, and I can climb fast because I'm a lion." She seemed to smile smugly as she

looked down at him.

He looked like he was trying to find a response, but couldn't. He took a deep, shaky breath and stepped back from the tree.

Ava's eyes glimmered. "You should just step down, Henry," she said, trying to sound neutral, but I could tell she was having fun with this.

Before he could respond, Hafsa elegantly leaped down from the tree, flourishing her tail. "It's okay, I'll be the bigger person," she said cockily.

Just then, I noticed Shebal and Abigail were walking up to us from the counselor's cabin.

"Hey," I said, "the counselors are coming."

Hafsa quickly changed back, Ava and Genette launched into a conversation, and Gwen dragged me over to Hafsa so we could pretend to be chatting too. I waved Ripley over. Henry stood awkwardly near his other sister, his arms crossed and his face dark.

Shebal didn't seem impressed by this. "Just my luck that you're all here when I need to make a serious announcement," he said. "If you'd please look at me so I know you're all paying attention… Okay. Good." He sighed stiffly, looking at Hafsa, Gwen, and me. "We have made a terrible discovery. A kelpie, a mother, was caught in a trap this morning. She succumbed to her injuries."

We were all silent for quite a while. Gwen's face was getting red as she tried to hold in her tears. I timidly offered my hand to her, but she didn't accept it.

"I have lived here my whole life," Shebal went on, "and we have never found traps on or around our islands. The lakefellow guards who found this kelpie have been monitoring the shores to make sure we're safe at our camp." He paused for a moment,

clearly struggling with his emotions. "Setting traps… Is a serious offense."

Gwen sniffled, but aside from that, we remained uncomfortably quiet.

Shebal explained that if anyone was caught making or setting traps, they would be immediately sent home and there may be further punishment. But he moved quickly to teaching us how to mark traps, how to keep out of them, and that we should never try to disable them ourselves.

"I know how to," Ava said. "If anyone finds one and needs it taken apart, I'll gladly do it."

Shebal shook his head. "That's kind of you to offer, Ava, but for everyone's safety you need to leave it to myself, Jason, or Abigail. In the worst case scenario, the lakefellow guards can help you if it's near the water.

"We will be doing a sweep of the island for traps, but we won't be able to confirm that there are none left until the camp is finished. If you are to go anywhere outside of your cabins, please make sure you're with at least one other person. We will hold off on activities in the woods or on the shores until further notice." He concluded. "Does everyone understand?"

We all nodded solemnly.

"If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask any of us," Abigail added with a smile as tense as the atmosphere. "We're really sorry about this. I know it must be very disappointing for you all."

"Uh, hey guys," Jason's voice suddenly sounded from behind us and we all turned around to see him standing there, awkwardly, smiling. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important, but lunch is ready."

Shebal laughed, but it was hollow. "Okay everyone, go ahead

with Abigail. Jason, please see me in our cabin, we need to talk." With that, he was off.

Jason looked at Abigail for some guidance, but she busied herself with getting us together. We left for lunch, and after, we played volleyball. Shebal and Jason came back, and they were acting normal and happy, as though nothing had happened. But the way they both looked out at the water told us otherwise.

Chapter Nine (Ava)

On Sunday morning, Ripley asked us to leave the cabin for a little while so he could do his testosterone shot. Henry went down to the dock and sulked while Genette and I sat by the fire pit. She wanted to know more about me, so I was telling her how Alan taught me how to hunt and fish. She was listening intently, but there was something else behind her face.

During a break in my flow, I asked, "What's up?"

She smiled. "I'm liking this, but you're saying Alan taught you this, Alan taught you that… What did you teach yourself? What's Ava like?"

I felt myself blush all across my face and down my neck. I drew my knees up to my chest. I didn't know why she would ask that. "I… I like hunting and fishing."

She nodded. "And I like weeding the garden, but that's something Sid's grandmother taught me. What I really like is bugs."

"Tell me about that," I said.

Her eyes lit up and she smiled, but she stopped herself. "Hey, that's sneaky. We're talking about you."

I found myself smiling so much I hid my face between my knees. "I don't know," I said, stalling.

"Come on, I'm sure you do."

I tried to think of anything I enjoyed that wasn't because I lived where I did, surrounded by nature. Hiking, boating, swimming, biking on the trails, walking around the endless cottage country, identifying animal tracks… None of that was from before. What was from before? I tried to look back, but…

I shook myself suddenly. "I guess I like biking," I said, sort of stiffly. "I used to do that when I lived in the city."

She looked at me sort of sadly, but the emotion passed. "What kind of music do you like? Movies? Television? Books?"

I felt a huge amount of tension leave my body. Why was I so dumb? I uncurled my legs and told her about some of my favorite movies, and the CDs I brought, trying to shake the feeling that she thought I was weird for assuming she was talking about physical hobbies I did. All the while, I pushed away thoughts of my life before. It was easy, since she was so easy to talk to, with her welcoming smile and warm laughter. We had some similar interests in the way of movies and TV, but her music taste was wildly different from mine. I liked soft pop music and she liked death metal. We shared earbuds to share our music, sitting in the warm sun.

When Ripley texted us that he was finished, Henry went back inside. At first, I didn't want to go; I was enjoying my time with Genette too much. But she seemed worried about having the two guys alone together, and I agreed with her, so we went inside. She suggested we could sit on my bed and that was overwhelming for some reason, but we did anyway. We watched a movie we'd both seen before, laying on my bed with her laptop on my pillows. I couldn't stop blushing the whole time.

"So, you lived in America, right?" I asked her, feeling too distracted to watch the movie properly.

She rolled onto her side and stretched her legs. "Yeah, in Oregon. I lived in a somewhat small town."

"What was it like?"

"My mom worked at a golf course and my dad was a traveling salesman. We lived in a pretty big house and when Sid came to live with us when he was four, we both went to the elementary school nearby, about a ten minute walk."

"I knew he was adopted," Henry whispered across the room.

Her eyes flashed.

"Shut up Henry!" I snapped, then lowered my voice, mindful of Ripley. "You're adopted, idiot."

He loudly shut his curtain.

Genette held back laughter. "He's adopted?" she asked.

I made a so-so motion with my hand. "The three of us were adopted by the family we live with, but we're siblings."

She nodded. "Sid's mother's a family friend." She looked down for a moment, closing the topic. "But yeah, it was cool there. We didn't get out very much, we weren't really allowed to go out on our own and my parents didn't have the money to take us places. Sometimes on weekends we could explore. But the house was nice and school was okay."

"How did you end up here?"

"We came on a train. Sid's two grandmas and his uncle were waiting for us at the station, and we took their car back to their house near Maxville. That's when I was ten and he was about seven."

"And you live with them still?" I asked, steering away from the original intent of my previous question. If she didn't want to talk about it, which is what it felt like from her answer, then I wouldn't pry.

"Sid's maternal grandmother passed away that year. We live

with her wife and his uncle still."

"Oh, they were married," I said. For some reason, that felt important to me, even though I don't think it should be.

She gave me a sideways glance, nodding. "Anyway… It's good there. The house is pretty small but there's a lot of land, and we get to go anywhere we like. Except for the swamp behind the house."

"Why's that?"

Her gaze hardened. "We're just not allowed to," she said, but relaxed when she noticed that I flinched. "It's for our safety," she added.

I nodded nonchalantly, but my heart was racing. I didn't know why. Desperate to change the topic, I got her to tell me more about her family. Or Sid's family, as she delicately put it. We talked for a while, and eventually the conversation led to us discussing our interests again, but now it was about her. She told me about a science camp she'd gone to in America. She'd done a lot of experiments with chemical reactions and building small structures, but the most interesting part for her was the natural science lessons. They all went outside and looked for bugs, then brought them back in little containers and made a habitat for them. At the end of the week, when the camp was ending, they'd release the bugs again after caring for them for the duration of camp. If they were really good, they'd even get to take the bugs home overnight.

"Did you take yours home?"

She beamed. "I did! It scared Sid, so I kept it in my bedroom."

"What was it?"

"A ladybug."

"Really? I expected a spider or something."

She laughed. "Yeah, Sid didn't like anything that flew or

crawled when he was younger."

I smiled. "I also thought a spider would fit your personality a lot better… Or at least your looks."

She blushed a bit, running her hands through her hair and looking genuinely nervous.

"I meant that as a compliment," I got out quickly.

She blushed harder and said she knew and that I'd make a better ladybug girl anyway. I found myself blushing all the way up to my ears, which made her giggle, which made me giggle. We laughed with each other and it filled me with warmth.

She caught her breath and looked at me for a long while, smiling softly, her eyes gently squinted, before shoving me playfully. Beside myself with excitement, I pushed her back and we started to wrestle on my bed.

I'd never done this before; wrestling with a girl I liked or even hanging out with a girl I liked. I had only one friend at school, and we were only friends in school. Before we'd moved I wasn't allowed to have friends over, much less leave the house, so this was entirely new. Entirely strange. And I was entirely loving it, but I didn't know how much was right. It was true that she was already one of the closest people to me in my entire life, and even though we barely knew each other I felt the overwhelming need to memorize her like the routine of seasonal changes at the lake we live on. I wanted her to know me, too, but somehow, I didn't know where to put this.

"What are you two doing in there?" Henry's voice, followed by stomping footsteps, made me jump out of my skin.

"Nothing," Genette said instinctively, rolling into a sitting position.

"Don't open my curtain," I said as Henry's shadow appeared on the floor.

"Why not?" he jeered, but the curtain stayed shut.

I glanced at Genette. Her eyes were fiery and her face was red, but she had a small, embarrassed frown. I wondered what she was thinking.

"Because that's invasive, idiot," I snapped as I sat up, shaking out my hair. "Go bother someone else."

"Calm down. I was just trying to tell you that it's almost time for dinner."

"I know," I shot back, glancing at the time on Genette's laptop.

"Fine," he said with a loud sigh. "I was just trying to be helpful."

Genette snorted quietly as he stormed out of the cabin. It was water off my back. That's just how my brother is.

Genette and I finished the movie we were watching, but we didn't get back to the excitable closeness we had before. I didn't know why, but that made my chest ache. No, that's not even true, I knew why. I just didn't know why it was about her.

At dinner, we ate quietly under a tense atmosphere. After what felt like forever, Shebal stood up and cleared his throat.

"Everyone," he began carefully, "I've got an important question to ask you. We've been thinking, Jason and Abigail and myself, about the safety of holding our camp here. Between the unusually increased activity of wildlife in the area and the dangers of hidden traps on the shoreline, it's becoming a real concern." He looked out at us steadily. Coldly. "We could have handled one, but not both."

I shuddered. Genette glanced at me, worried, but I couldn't give her anything.

"So, my question for you is, by a show of hands, who thinks it would be worthwhile to stay?"

Before he'd even finished talking, Ripley's hand shot up.

Shebal cracked a smile, but Jason tapped his arm and whis-

pered something to him.

"Okay, Jason says we should do this anonymously. Everyone, put your heads down on the table and don't look when I ask for votes. Alright?"

We all did as we were told.

"Raise your hand if you want to stay the rest of the month."

There was some shuffling. I didn't peek. I hesitated, but I did raise my hand when I felt Genette move beside me.

"Okay, thank you. Now, raise your hand if you want to be sent home early. There will be a full refund."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Genette moved again. My heart sank to the soles of my feet.

"Okay, thank you. You may put your hands down and look up now."

My heart hammered wildly as I did, making my vision blur a bit. I stared straight ahead.

Shebal, Jason, and Abigail shared an intense moment of silence before Shebal looked back at us.

Taking a slow breath, he crossed his arms and announced, "Camp Shimmering Lake will continue to run until the fourth of August, as planned. But please, if you have any concerns, come see us in our cabin at any time."

Ripley, Hafsa, and even Gwen looked excited, but I didn't care. I couldn't read Genette's face. I couldn't read my own heart.

Chapter Ten (Sid)

Monday night into Tuesday morning, I heard screaming. The same screaming as before, but… Somehow this time it was different. Mournful. Lonely. Staring at the wood grain, I felt lonely too.

I found my notebook in the darkness, holding it close to my chest as I breathed quietly. My ears strained, picking up the delicate creaks of the cabin, the hum of the air conditioner, the dripping of the faucet, and the girls' sleepy breathing. I wondered why the kelpie hadn't woken Gwen this time. I wondered why that made me feel special.

Grabbing my phone, I turned on the flashlight and awkwardly positioned it on the guard rail so it wasn't shining into the rest of the room as I used the light to write. I turned to another fresh page, recording the time and date and writing out how the cries were different now. I made sure to mention that nobody else woke up to them. After that, I had nothing else to write, but I didn't want to stop yet. I watched the words swim as the wails grew more and more distant, the room getting darker and darker…

My phone flopped to the bed with a soft thump and I jerked back awake. Collecting myself, I decided that I should just go back to sleep. I put my book away and curled up.

Instantly, it was morning, and I had a pounding headache. I sighed and turned off my alarm, rolling over and stretching under the covers.

"Are you getting up, Sid?" Hafsa's voice startled me.

I rolled back over and sat up, blinking. "Sorry. Yeah. What time is it?"

"Nearly seven thirty," she said. "I figured I'd—"

She was cut off by pounding on the door.

"We're up!" she screamed, and I heard the door groan as it was thrown open. "I told you I can get them up myself!"

Shebal laughed. "You usually have them up and out by now. I thought you needed some help."

"We're fine," she said, closing the door slowly. "What's breakfast?"

"Pancakes," he said right as she shut the door.

I'd gotten dressed and was making my way down the ladder. Gwen came out of the washroom, so I hurried in and finished getting ready. I took some Advil and hoped that by the end of breakfast I'd be feeling better.

As we were eating, Abigail said we would be playing handball in the morning and volleyball in the afternoon, and after that, we were being challenged to find the archery equipment in the storage shed. The thought of doing any of that made my whole body so tired.

When I brought my dishes up, I went up to Abigail and asked her if it would be okay if I sat out today.

"Why? Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes showing her concern.

I shrugged. "I didn't sleep well at all last night and I feel kinda sick…"

"Of course, let me know if you need anything."

I thanked her, feeling a great weight off me as I walked back to my cabin. I went right up to bed, but instead of changing back into pajamas and taking a nap, my brain immediately started buzzing. I dug out my notebook. I read over what I wrote last night.

And I read it over again.

And I read it over again.

And I decided I had to do something about this feeling. It was getting overwhelming. The loneliness in those cries had become my own, and I had to know… I had to know… Something. I couldn't tell what.

I waited for a while; I knew Hafsa was going to come get her athletic hijab and I couldn't have anyone catch me, so I pretended to be asleep until a few moments after she left again. Then I crept down from my bunk to carefully open the door.

It creaked. I winced. When my eyes had adjusted to the light, I saw Abigail across the field, waving at me. Awkwardly, I waved back and pretended to be getting some fresh air before going back inside.

What could I do now? I sat on the floor with a frustrated sigh. Holding my head in my hands, I traced shapes in the wood panel flooring, trying to form a plan. They would be having lunch in a little while, just over two hours now. I could entertain myself until then for sure, I had some books and my phone. But Hafsa would come back to pray, and Gwen might want to shower after eating… I had no way of knowing. If I went out for lunch, I'd feel too awkward about asking for the afternoon off too, so I couldn't go out and subtly ask them. But I'd definitely get hungry if I didn't get lunch, and they probably know that. Genette at least does. So somebody will probably bring food and check on me. So I had to wait for that to happen. But then

again, what if nobody comes and I wait so long that they start playing outside again? I'd miss my chance to sneak away while they're all eating. And even if I do get to sneak out during lunch, I can't guarantee nobody will see me through the windows.

Groaning out loud, I rubbed my temples. All that complexity was giving me an even worse headache. It felt so hopeless. That made me feel so small. All at once, I was overcome with an intense sadness, like I had lost a friend. But this was so much worse than when we'd moved to Canada and I lost my school friends. I was ripped apart. The wailing, the lost, tired, lonely wailing filled my mind, and as though I was dreaming, I could see him. A glimmer in the murky lake, a flash of white, like snow underwater…

I had to write this down. It couldn't escape me.

By the time Genette brought a small plate of food to the door, I was glowing with eagerness to find this kelpie. She didn't stick around, luckily, because everyone else still had to eat. I packed the food, a burger and fries, in a clean plastic garbage bag before sneaking out.

The door creaked. The sun's glare reflected harshly off the big windows of the main building. I couldn't see inside; could they see me? I froze, waiting, but nothing happened. Breathing a sigh of relief, I slipped around the side of my cabin and into the inviting woods.

As if by magic, the coolness and darkness alleviated my headache. The thick canopy offered a lovely blanket of shade for me to walk under as I tried to figure out where to go from here. I closed my eyes, feeling the breeze on my skin, smelling the green life of the forest, and listening to the birds and squirrels in the trees. I tried to play that cry over again in my mind to see if I could place which direction it came from, but every time I

got close, I was filled with that gripping dread again.

Giving up on that, I kicked a fallen piece of bark around indecisively. I eventually figured it would be best to not let my lunch get so cold that I didn't want it, so I headed towards the big rock in the woods so I could sit and eat.

I found it bathed in warm sunlight. I sat on it, finding it comfortable enough, and unwrapped my burger from the plastic bag. Just as I was going to take a bite, I heard it.

The cry curled through the air, soft and pained. Instantly I was on my feet, running towards the shore that wasn't very far now, where the sound rose again above the wind, only to stop as abruptly as it had started.

I had crashed through the undergrowth, right onto the beach with the shining shells, right in front of the most beautiful white stallion I had ever seen. His mane and tail were long and silvery white, slick to his body and flowing across the sand like water. He had delicate legs and ears and an elegantly arched neck, with a narrow, straight face. His chest was deep and broad, and his muscles were well-defined under his glossy coat, even though he didn't look fully grown. His eyes were odd, a little more forward than I thought they should be on a horse, but their striking color commanded me to stop thinking. The blue, like nothing I'd ever seen before, went right into my soul. He looked at me, unfazed, like I was meant to be here. Like it was my destiny to see him.

For some reason, I was embarrassed that I didn't have anything planned past this point. Was I supposed to say something? What would I even say? Nervous, I started laughing. The stallion stepped a little closer, not leaving the lapping reach of the lake. His head lowered slightly as he faced me head on, his eyes still searching me. It was then that I noticed a frightening

detail about his face: his mouth was too long, the corners of the lips were much further back, like a canine mouth. And his nostrils, too, were strange; they had a glossy membrane over them. Same with his ears, pointed towards me like a radar. His eyes, forward facing, predatory eyes, glittering and inviting…

No.

I shook my head hard, backing up until leaves and twigs crunched under my feet.

"No," I murmured out loud. This creature, this stallion that I was looking at, that was looking into me, was not a horse. "This is a kelpie. You're… You're a kelpie."

He stopped, resting one front leg on the tip of the hoof, studying me with the same expression. Horrible. Kind.

"I have to get out of here," I said frantically, scrambling to unwrap my burger. The kelpie's eyes flitted between my face and my hands. I froze when I looked at him, so I closed my eyes and tossed the burger in his general direction. I winced, waiting for something, but it remained silent. Risking a peek, I saw him sniffing at it for a second, but he quickly looked back up at me when he saw I'd opened my eyes.

He blew from his nostrils softly, then turned and walked further into the lake until the water was just over his knees.

I tried to turn and run. I really did. But he had me there, held in those blue eyes, helpless. And he invited me to join him.

I couldn't stop myself from taking a step forward, then another, then another. My shoes sank into the sand as I was dragged by his gaze. The water kissed my shoes. The plastic bag rustled in my hand, startling me out of my trance only a foot from the kelpie. Adrenaline, like icy fire, lit me up and let me whirl around and run back into the woods. I barely felt myself moving until I was quite close to the cabin, where I had

to stop and catch my breath, leaning on a tree.

Panting, I trembled all over, the image of his eyes burned into my eyelids, filling my mind with each blink. Hearing voices not too far away, I jumped, my heart racing as I tried to stay as still as possible while being ready to bolt. I focused on the sound until I heard, strangely, my sister's laughter. Then I realized it was just the other campers coming out from lunch. I took a moment to calm down before sliding around the side of the cabin to sit by the door.

Across the field, Genette saw me and waved. She and Ripley walked over.

"Are you feeling any better?" Genette asked, sitting beside me.

I nodded, forcing a smile. She didn't seem to notice. I asked them how their day was going, so Ripley told me about the game. He invited me to play with him when volleyball was set up, or at least to watch if I still wasn't feeling well.

I paused, catching my words in my throat. "Sure," I managed. "I'll watch. I just need to do something inside."

"Okay," Ripley said, then turned to my sister. "Let's get him a chair, I'm sure there's some loose ones laying around somewhere. And if not, we can drag one of the campfire logs closer to where we're playing."

She nodded. "Sounds good."

The two of them got up and hurried back to the rest of the group after saying goodbye. I watched them go for a moment, then stepped inside. As the door shut, my shoulders drooped and I let out a huge sigh.

How could I have been that foolish? Of course it was a kelpie. I would know that sound anywhere, even if Hafsa hadn't confirmed it the other night. With all this talk about kelpies

and traps, I should have assumed, I shouldn't have been caught off guard. I had gone out there to find the kelpie, to follow the cries, and I'd found him. Why did he still scare me so much? Genette's the one who's scared of kelpies, not me.

Not me.

I wrote all this down; I had to. Then I washed up in the bathroom, put the plastic bag away, and grabbed my plate off the snacks table. I also grabbed a bag of chips because I was hungry and a little annoyed with myself for wasting that burger.

I brought my plate out to the kitchen, where Abigail and Hafsa had just taken their aprons off.

"Oh, not more," Hafsa complained, reaching for a clean apron.

Abigail touched her shoulder. "Don't worry, I've got it. Go on and help them set up the net."

She smiled. "Thanks Abigail." Then to me, she said, "Are you joining us?"

"I'm gonna watch. I still feel a little lightheaded."

She disappeared behind the wall for a moment, then walked out through the kitchen door. She gave me a sympathetic look and said she hopes I feel better soon.

"Thank you, I'm sure I will," I said quietly, feeling my skin prickle. I didn't like lying to her for some reason. It made me feel sick in my stomach, similar to if I was lying to Grandma.

She gave me a final warm smile before leaving. Through the service window, I watched Abigail put on an apron. She leaned her elbows on the counter and looked at me, worried. I couldn't read her face past that.

"I can wash this if you want," I said nervously, holding up the plate.

"No no, it's okay," she reached out for it, "I'll join you in a moment."

I stood there awkwardly until the water turned on, then I rushed out. Across the field, Genette and Ripley had dragged one of the logs into a shady patch beside a large pine tree. Hafsa, Gwen, and Henry were struggling to untangle the net as Jason and Ava finished setting up the poles. Shebal clambered out of the storage building, carrying the bag of assorted sports balls.

He shook himself out and said, "It's so dusty in there! I hope everyone's excited to clean it out."

I steered clear of the mess as I made my way to my seat. Genette motioned for me to come quicker, so I hurried up and stood beside her.

"Watch this dumbass," she said, nodding at Henry.

He had his foot caught in the net, but I don't think he knew it yet. He was yelling at Gwen that the corner she was holding was upside down, and she was clearly getting overwhelmed and frustrated.

"Fine!" Hafsa snapped, grabbing the net and yanking it so it flipped around.

"Oh no," I said, but it was too late.

Henry yelped as his leg shot out from under him, dragging him to the ground with a loud thud. He didn't move, but I could hear him wheeze from here. Ava abandoned Jason and ran over, but the counselor followed quickly. Gwen started crying and Hafsa tried to comfort her.

I glanced up at Genette; her amused expression comforted me, but I was worried he was really hurt. She seemed to read my mind and told me it'd be fine and that we shouldn't add to the chaos.

"Yeah," Ripley agreed, but he was rocking uncomfortably. "I don't want to get caught up in that."

The situation had resolved itself almost as quickly as it had

happened. Henry got to his feet with Ava's help, Jason briefly checked him over for injuries but he was adamant about being fine, and Gwen calmed down when he agreed with Hafsa that it had just been an accident. He still stomped off to his cabin without much of an explanation.

Genette, Ripley, and I drifted over to the scene, where Ava looked decently shaken up. Genette immediately spoke to her while Hafsa and Gwen pulled me aside.

"Are you okay?" I asked Gwen, who was still drying her face.

She nodded. "It happens, it's fine."

I didn't want to press in front of everyone, so I made sure Hafsa was okay too. Jason and Shebal told us we should probably leave volleyball for another day.

"Cleaning is gonna take longer, and I promise that's gonna pay off a lot more," Shebal said. "It is dusty and difficult work, but if we don't do it, we'll be stuck playing handball and volleyball all summer."

"Weren't we just supposed to find the archery stuff?" Ava protested.

Jason laughed.

"Well… Yeah. But we've already used the volleyball net a few times and look at the state it's in. We've gotta clean this building out," Shebal said, playing with his hair.

Abigail walked over, looking confused, so Jason quietly talked to her. Shebal helped us take down the poles and lay them on the ground, then we sorted out the net, and dragged the balls over too. Ava and Hafsa delved into the building, but Genette checked up on me before she joined them. I promised her that I was doing okay and had to confirm again with Abigail that I felt okay enough to help out, if only a little bit.

I helped Ripley and Gwen go through boxes with Shebal's

supervision, sitting on the log that we had to drag back to the fire pit. First, we were tasked with sorting through everything to see what was broken and what we could still use. The broken stuff would be put aside to bring to the Guses later. Ava brought over the first box and we got to work, brushing the dust away and opening the flaps. Inside, there was a massive tangle of Christmas lights.

"What?" Gwen laughed, holding them up.

"Oh! That can go to the Guses. It belongs to them." Shebal said.

"Why do you have it?" I asked.

"They used to live here, in the storage building, about three years ago. It wasn't a storage building then, of course. When tensions started rising between the Catfolk and the Lakefellows, they built their home behind their shop," he explained. "It wasn't just my relationship that sparked the conflict… There was a lot of anxiety about hunting disputes and whether or not they could make their nests under our island. It got too much for the quiet lifestyle the Guses like to lead."

"I don't blame them," Ripley said. "That sounds rough."

"Neither do I."

Gwen laughed again, but it was out of nervousness this time. "I still have trouble believing all this. Like I know I'm here, living in it all, but… Wow, right?"

Ripley and I both gave her sympathetic nods, but I know he didn't relate, and I didn't either.

Shebal smiled, closing up the box and pushing it aside. "It can be overwhelming, can't it? You're doing well, as far as I can see. I suppose it helps that we're not trying to hide anything this year."

Ripley giggled. "Oh, thanks Genette," he said, standing up

and grabbing the box my sister had just carried over.

She dusted off the front of her shirt with a sigh. "I wish I wasn't wearing black. This is never gonna wash out!"

We went on like this for what felt like forever, sorting through everything from dusty old bedding and dishware to proper camp supplies like hula hoops, colored pinnies, dodge balls, field hockey equipment, and even one of those huge rainbow parachutes that I remembered loving to play with in kindergarten. We also found some pool floaties and other water toys, but Shebal put those away pretty quickly. The weirdest thing, though, was a completely furnished and usable tank for a turtle or lizard. When we had finally found the archery equipment, it was still an hour or more until dinnertime. Everyone was sweaty, dusty, and exhausted, so the counselors agreed it was time for us to all shower.

"You guys all stink," Jason joked, herding the girls out of the storage building, "but I do too. Let's get washed up. We'll finish this up another day. Hey Shebal! Go get Henry and tell him he's on dinner duty tonight since he didn't help out."

Shebal snorted in amusement. "That sounds fair to me."

Gwen and Ava giggled.

"I don't think he's gonna be too happy about that," Ripley said as he helped me bring the sorted boxes inside again.

"Yeah… I'm sorry you have to sleep in the same room as him."

He rolled his eyes. "It's certainly interesting. Your sister and him do not get along one bit."

"Believe me, I know."

After we all showered, dinner was ready, so we went out to eat. Henry and Shebal had made hot dogs and salad, and Abigail had made lemonade, a family recipe. It was a nice dinner, but hot dogs and salad was a weird combination.

Genette invited me to sit with her after we picked up our plates. We took a table to ourselves. While we were eating, she asked me if I'd been feeling okay lately.

"Oh, I just had a bad headache this morning," I said.

"No, I meant like… What's been on your mind?"

I paused. "Nothing really."

She raised an eyebrow, putting her fork down. "Are you sure about that?"

I looked down. "Well… I don't know." I shrugged, then quickly changed the subject, asking if she's excited for archery.

She didn't back down; I knew she wouldn't. "You don't need to hide things from me."

"I know that…"

"Don't you trust me?"

"It's not about that, you know that," I said, sighing. "It's just… Complicated."

She leaned her chin on her hand. "Do you have a crush on someone?"

My face flushed bright red. "What?"

"Ooh, Sid has a crush," she cooed, then burst into laughter.

I couldn't help but laugh too. Maybe I could play it off as a crush. Before I could add anything else, she said she actually was excited for archery.

"I want to learn more," she went on. "I've had enough of sports. I hope we can finish cleaning soon so we have more stuff to do."

I nodded. "I don't like volleyball, and it's weird to play with so few people."

She sighed and went back to her food. "It would be nice to get out on the water… It's been pretty uneventful lately, so who knows. Here's hoping nothing messes that up."

Chapter Eleven (Ava)

Rain on Wednesday morning meant it was too wet for cleaning, but it gave us enough time after lunch to get a lesson on archery in the muggy sunshine. The counselors had set up thick wooden targets right along the ridge of grass before the ground sloped down to the shore. Since there were only three bows, three of us at a time were instructed carefully by Shebal on how to nock an arrow, draw, and fire. Henry and I already knew how to shoot, so he didn't need to help us. Henry was a little rusty, though; he preferred crossbows. Ripley was having some trouble keeping the arrow in place, so I came up and showed him a trick I used to keep it steady, because Shebal was busy helping Sid. It was simple enough and he got it right away, so I sat back down. Later, when Sid's arm guard flew off with the arrow, I ran over to make sure he wasn't hurt and help him put it back on more securely.

"You're gonna have to make sure your arm doesn't bend like that," I said, demonstrating a proper position for him. "The bowstring can hurt you pretty bad."

He thanked me and I watched him shoot a couple times to make sure he got the hang of it, then sat back down again.

Henry gave me a light shove. "You sure like to be the center of attention, huh?"

"What? I'm just helping. It's nothing about me."

He rolled his eyes. "Sure. I bet you're just guessing."

"You literally know I'm better at archery than you."

"Wanna bet?"

I punched his shoulder playfully. "We live together and we hunt together. You don't need to prove you're a worse shot with a bow, Gwen and I have seen it enough for a lifetime."

Gwen giggled. "Don't be too mean, Ava," she said.

Genette put her bow down, turning around. "I'd be willing to see that. A competition between you."

I looked up at her, exaggerating my shock. "Genette! I thought you were on my side."

"Oh, I am," she said, grinning. "I wanna see you wipe the floor with him."

"There won't be any of that," Abigail said from behind us. We turned to see she was standing with her arms crossed, a bag full of rope dangling from one hand. "When everyone has had a few turns with the bow, we'll be teaching you how to tie different knots."

Henry perked up, but Gwen, Genette and Sid all looked disappointed.

Abigail laughed. "I know this is pretty boring, but it's useful! It can help you in a lot of situations."

When we had finished, Abigail sat us all down and went through the basics of knot tying. Ripley kept zoning out, dozing off with his chin in his hand. The fourth time he dropped his rope, Henry nudged him awake and offered to teach him later.

Ripley looked embarrassed. "It's okay, I can try to stay awake…"

"Hey, it's really fine. Go ahead and nap," he said. Why was he being so nice?

He rubbed the shaved sides of his head with his knuckles. "Thanks. It's just the testosterone is making me so tired now. I can't seem to get enough sleep."

Henry laughed. "I've been there. When I was twelve, but still."

After Ripley left, I gave Henry a sideways look. "What's gotten into you? It's almost like you have manners or something."

He shoved my shoulder, hard. "I'm not always an asshole!"

"Yes you are!" I hit him back.

Abigail cleared her throat and gave us both a disappointed frown. We busied ourselves with tying knots.

The next day, the sun had cooked away all the dampness from the previous rain, so we were tasked with finishing cleaning the storage building. Abigail and Shebal were inside making lunch while Jason supervised us from the doorway. He needed to be able to see inside the building while Ripley, Henry, Sid, and Genette swept, dusted, and handled boxes, but he also had to watch me, my sister, and Hafsa sort through the contents of the boxes.

Everything was so dusty and full of cobwebs, and we kept finding shed skins from weird bugs. I tried to keep most of them to show Genette when she delivered boxes for us, but Gwen gagged and squirmed.

"They're not for you," I said with a sigh, fed up with her squeamishness. "Move over there if you don't like seeing them."

She pouted, eyeing the pile like she might crush it with the bocce ball she was holding. "I don't get why you're bothering with them. You don't like creepy crawlies."

"Well, Genette does."

She stuck out her tongue again.

I snatched the ball from her. "Go on!"

"Fine," she huffed, making a big show of getting up and sitting

beside Hafsa. "Weirdo."

When Genette came over with a large box of what looked like camping gear, she took some time to look over the shed skins with me. I listened intently as she explained what each one was from, but I felt a little out of my depth when she was puzzling over what a few of them were.

"Hey, it's alright, I'm just bouncing ideas off you," she said, noticing how awkward I looked. "I don't expect you to know if I don't. I kinda am the bug expert here."

"Yeah you are!" I smiled brightly. "Which means these bugs you can't identify are probably, uh, not… They're only found here."

She nodded, then looked over her shoulder. "Oh, there's Ripley. Hey, Ripley! Come help me identify these bugs."

His face lit up and he hurried over, putting the box down on one of the sitting logs. He sat down between us on the grass. Genette held up the skins for him to examine. He didn't recognize any of them, so he took out his notebook and carefully sketched them. I started unpacking the camping supplies while he wrote about the bugs, getting Genette to help him make educated guesses about what they were like in life.

Henry brought out another box for us. I'd finished with this one, so I told him to take it back.

"Why can't he?" He jabbed his thumb at Ripley.

"He's busy," Genette and I said at the same time.

Henry huffed, rolled his eyes, and stomped off with the box.

It didn't take us too long to finish cleaning and sorting everything. The little old house was still in rough shape, but even though it wouldn't be livable again, it wasn't full of dust and dirt. All the boxes with old family stuff had been put in the bedroom, the kitchen stuff in the kitchen, and the actual camp

stuff in the living room. Shebal came out near the end to help us organize that. When we were closing up, I overheard them talking in the kitchen. I was the only camper left inside, so I stayed.

"… went looking the other night," Shebal said, "after everyone went to bed."

In the living room, I focused on the bright world outside the door, the light spilling across the entryway. I made myself perfectly still.

"And?"

"I couldn't find any new ones."

"So the only trap is the one that killed the kelpie."

Silence for a moment.

"I don't necessarily think that's all of them," Jason said.

"My thoughts exactly. We'll keep looking, but… I don't want to have to get Rivan, Jolly, and Vetsey involved, but they're the best at this sort of thing."

There was shuffling, so I hurriedly slipped away before they could see me.

Lunch was a weird meatloaf thing. I didn't really feel like eating it, so I went to Gwen's table and offered it to her. She shyly took it.

"If you can't finish all that, could I have some?" Ripley asked her. "I love this too!"

She looked relieved. "Go ahead," she said, cutting my portion in half and giving it to him.

Feeling awkward just standing there, I took advantage of the opportunity to talk to Hafsa. I cleared my throat and said, "Hey, Hafsa?"

She looked up from her sandwich. "Yeah?"

"Do you know who Jolly, Vetsey, and Rivan are?"

She blinked, clearly perplexed. "Uh. Yeah. They're catfolk, the scouts and the military leader. Why?"

My eyes widened, but I tried to not look too weird about it. "Oh, I just overheard your brother talking about them, and I thought I could ask you," I rubbed my neck and shifted my weight. "I was just wondering is all."

She shrugged. "Okay. No problem."

I hurried up to the service window to drop off my plate before hiding in my bed. I had a meal replacement drink and then went for a walk to cool off. I didn't know why I'd made such a fool of myself, but I guess it was spiritually justifiable, because I'd put Gwen on the spot like that.

As I wandered in the shady woods behind the cabins, I reflected on the coolness of the air, the warmth of the sun when it cut through the canopy, and the constant trilling and singing of the birds in the trees. It was so peaceful here. Even more peaceful than Aileen and Alan's, with the speedboats and kids from other cottages, and the vacationers. In winter, too, they had loud ice fishing gear and snowmobiles. The sounds of the city were somehow always there, in the background. Following me.

Here, though there was a road not too far from us across the lake, I was hidden away from it all. I really had been swept away to a magical, secret place. I guess it'll keep hitting me that all this is real. It would probably help if I had something with me all the time to remind me that it's real, like how Gwen has Hafsa in her cabin. Ripley, of course, loves to tell us about all sorts of things that he's seen, but it's easier to think of that as a story rather than… Than what it really is.

I was shaken from my thoughts by Genette's voice calling my name. I turned to see her jogging up the path to me.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked, worried by the look on her face.

"I… I don't know, I just, I found this… Thing? Egg? And it hatched. It's some kind of tarantula I think but I don't," she took a breath, "I have no idea. I don't know what to do."

I put my hands up. "Woah, woah. Slow down. It's okay. Can you start from the beginning for me?"

She focused on me, took a breath, and nodded. "I saw you leave, and I wanted to check up on you, so when I finished eating I went out after you. I was just walking down the path and my foot hit something weird on the ground, it looked kind of like a cottony egg, and it just kinda crumbled? And then this white tarantula crawled out and started shaking. It moved really slowly back into the egg but I don't think it's okay, I think I hurt it or something," she explained, still overwhelmed, but I could follow her now.

"First of all, it's gonna be okay, Genette. You're not going to get in trouble and you're not a bad person for maybe hurting it. Now let's go find Ripley and see what he has to say about it. Does that sound good?"

She nodded gratefully, kneading her fingers on the loose material of her black shirt. She tried to speak a few times before shaking her head and leading me back up the path. We only walked a little way before I saw what she was talking about.

Off to the side of the path, nestled between two arching roots, there was a strange white shape, almost like a very large egg. It looked cottony like she said, and there was a large indent in the top. She hurried over and I hung back, wanting to give her space.

"Good, it's still there," she said, crouching down. "Do you think I should pick it up?"

"It's a wild animal. If it's hurt or scared, it'll still try to defend

itself and I don't want you getting hurt." I said firmly. "We don't know what it is or what it can do to someone."

"You're right… I should have thought."

"It's okay, this is a lot," I reassured her. I didn't want to make her think she was dumb or immature, I just knew the dangers of handling wildlife and the thought of Genette getting hurt made my stomach twist itself into knots.

"It is," she said, standing up slowly and brushing off her jeans. She kept looking at the egg, biting her lip. "It is."

I looked at her, longing to know what was going on in her head so I could help her. I didn't want her to feel bad like this, but I didn't know what to do. Awkwardly, I told her she could always talk to me about how she's feeling, but I instantly regretted it because it felt like I was butting in to push an agenda or whatever. My face was flushed with embarrassment when she glanced up at me, but she just smiled and meekly thanked me.

We agreed it wasn't any use standing around, so we ran back to camp. Ripley was in our cabin; we must be between activities right now.

"What's going on?" he said, looking up from a drawing as Genette called his name from the door.

"Just come on," she said, waving him over. "There's something we have to show you. And bring that book!"

He leaped up and grabbed his stuff before rushing out the door after Genette. I held it open for him, and caught Henry's eye on the way out. Neither of us said anything, but that was enough to turn my stomach again.

In a haze, I followed them to the tree. Genette explained what had happened while Ripley sat and sketched. I was thankful that they were both too distracted to notice my weird mood. I

tried to shake it before Genette concluded her story.

"I think I know what this is," Ripley said, tapping his pencil on his chin.

I sat down on one of the roots, carefully keeping my feet out of the way. "Yeah?"

Using his pencil, he carefully pointed out the thin, flosslike interior strands of the wooly egg. He explained that they were made of something like spider's silk, and as it got closer to the outside of the egg, it became thicker and denser, like a moth's cocoon. He said that it was basically a cocoon, but for hibernation.

"It's the summer, though," Genette said. "What hibernates in the summer?"

"Snowspiders," he answered. "That's what this little guy is. Very visually similar to tarantulas, but they live in colder northern climates. They hibernate in these cocoons from the first true thaw to the first frost. They're not really spiders, though. They're more like crabs."

"Huh. I've never heard of them before."

He smiled lopsidedly. "That would be because they're only found in Silent Woods."

"What keeps them here? Do you know?" I asked.

"I've yet to find that out."

"Is it hurt?" Genette asked, leaning forward. She looked so worried. I felt a little bad for trying to change the subject.

"I don't think so. It's in shock, because it's still supposed to be asleep, but the damage is only to the cocoon."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "What should we do?"

He hummed. "We could leave it, but that would leave it exposed to predators and the elements. Not to mention other kids. Now, I am just guessing because I've never dealt with one

personally before, but I would assume it would be the best for it individually to keep it safe until it goes back into hibernation."

She nodded. "I'll do anything I can to help it."

"Alright! I'll write up a little care sheet so you know what kinds of things it should eat. Otherwise just let it do its thing."

She stood up. "Great, thank you so much, Ripley."

"No worries, this is what I do best," he said with a smile, delicately picking up the cocoon. "Do you want to carry it?"

She looked panicked for a second. "I… I'll pass for right now."

I gave her a reassuring look, but didn't want to put her on the spot in front of Ripley. I followed them quietly as we hurried back to the counselor's cabin. Outside, Genette grabbed my arm.

"What's up?"

"I'm too scared," she said. "I don't want to go in there. Can you?"

"Of course. But it's okay. You don't need to be scared," I said softly. "You didn't do anything wrong and you're not going to get in trouble."

She looked at me with wide eyes, tangling her fingers in her thin chain necklace, but before she could reply, the door opened. We all jumped a bit and looked up to see Jason and Shebal.

"Um, hi," I said, awkwardly smiling and brushing my hair out of my face. "We were just about to knock…"

"We have a bit of a situation," Ripley said hastily.

"I can see." Shebal rested a hand on his hip. "What exactly do you have there, Ripley? A snowspider cocoon?"

He nodded. "Yes actually! Oh, I suppose you would know, you live here. But yes, this is a snowspider cocoon, but the snowspider is in here as well. That's the problem. It got broken open and we're worried about it. Genette wants to keep it safe

until it can hibernate again, so it doesn't get stepped on or eaten or die from heat exhaustion. I know what they should eat, and beyond that, it's just a matter of time until it can rebuild its cocoon. Of course we have to get permission first, because it's not a good idea to hide an animal, especially not a Silent Woods animal."

"You also need a place to keep it," Shebal added, "but other than that, you sound like you know what you're doing. Jason?"

The other counselor blinked. "Right. Yes, I think you're capable of handling this, as long as you can find a place to keep it that won't let it escape. I know you well enough to know you won't try to smuggle it home, but Genette and Ava, you have to understand that if something lives in Silent Woods, it has to stay there."

We both nodded; she was much more enthusiastic.

Jason smiled tightly and gave us a firm nod. "Good. Not because we don't trust you, but we will be keeping an eye on you and the snowspider."

"Of course," Genette said. "I'll take the best care of it that I can."

Shebal turned to Jason. "Any idea where they'll keep it?"

He shook his head.

Ripley looked at us. In his hands, the cocoon rustled. Genette looked from him, to it, to me. I held her gaze for a long moment. Then, suddenly, my face lit up.

"I know!" I blurted.

"What?" Everyone said at once.

"In the storage building, we found something," I chewed at my lip anxiously, trying to remember the word for it, "glass box. Fish tank!"

"Fish tank!" Genette repeated, then looked up eagerly at

Shebal.

"Yes, I think that'll work," he said lightheartedly. "Let's go get you set up."

The two counselors quickly but thoroughly washed out the tank before bringing it into our cabin to set up. Since Genette had the top bunk, she asked me if I could keep the tank beside my bed.

"Of course," I said. "I don't have much here anyway."

"Thank you," she said, "but don't think this means I'm saddling you with the responsibility of taking care of Baby. I'll still feed him and check on him."

"Baby?"

She blushed. "Oh… Yeah. I figured he needed a name."

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, you know this isn't the same as getting a pet, Genette. You can name him, but don't get so attached that you can't release him when it's time to let him go."

She nodded diligently. "I promise I'll be able to. I only need to keep him for as long as it takes for him to hibernate again, and then we'll find a safe spot to return him in his cocoon to the wild."

"Exactly. If you have any questions or concerns, don't be afraid to ask me or Shebal."

"Or me," Ripley piped up. "Or at least involve me so I can learn."

Jason smiled widely. "Yes, Ripley, I'm sure your friends won't leave you out of this."

"Do you really think we would, Ripley? None of this would be possible without your help and knowledge," Genette said, still blushing. She was twisting her necklace again.

I thought she was getting a bit overwhelmed by everything

going on, so I politely suggested it was time to try to get him to eat something. Ripley hopped up and got Jason to take him to the kitchen in search of cucumber and lettuce; normally, Ripley told us, a snowspider eats bark, insects and small animals, and plants stuck under ice and snow. Produce we had on hand was a good enough substitution. As soon as they were out the door, Genette's shoulders slumped.

"Thanks, Ava," she said, sinking to the floor beside the tank. Inside, Baby was still crouched in his broken cocoon. "That was too much for me."

"It's okay, Genette. Do you wanna talk about it?"

She leaned her head into her hand, staring at the snowspider. "I don't know… I just feel so bad. I was being so careless, I could have hurt him or even killed him. I'm not squeamish or anything, and I get that things have to die sometimes, but not because I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking." She huffed. "Look at him, he's so fragile in there, and he shouldn't be out right now, like Ripley said."

I sat down beside her, crossing my arms across my lap because I didn't know what to do with my hands. "It was an accident, an honest mistake. You weren't being malicious."

"Yeah… I don't know why this is getting me so bad. It's not like I don't step on bugs by accident all the time, everybody does, and I guess this wouldn't be any different."

"It's okay to not know why something is impacting you so much," I said. "It's enough to know that it does, and how it makes you feel. You're doing the right thing, the mature thing, by taking care of him and not trying to make him into a pet." I lowered my voice a little, studying the curls of her hair, and the little strands that frizzed out. "You're doing right by him. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," she whispered. She reached out her hand to me, but as I was lifting my hand to take hers, the door opened. We both quickly put our hands down.

We spent the next hour or so with Jason and Ripley, trying to coax Baby out of his cocoon with slices of cucumber and crispy lettuce leaves. When we were called for dinner, Genette reluctantly let us give up. She left the food in a small pile not far from the cocoon and tenderly told him she would be back soon.

By dinner, word had gotten out that Genette was taking care of a snowspider. Everyone was talking about it and interested in seeing him, bothering us with questions as they gathered around our table. Genette was handling things a lot better now, back to her usual confident self. She was definitely a bit harsh with Henry when he asked to take him out, but I was grateful that she knew to be softer with my sister.

"I hope you get to take him home," she said dreamily, leaning on the edge of the table. "I'd just love a cool pet from here…"

I could see her face harden. "He's not a pet. He's still a wild animal, I'm only taking care of him until he's well enough to be released. Even if he doesn't get well before I can release him, I'm not taking him home."

"But he's yours, isn't he?" She was genuinely confused.

"Wild animals don't belong to anyone," Ripley interjected.

Genette gave him a tight smile, clearly a bit upset that he interrupted her, but knowing he didn't mean anything by it. "Plus, you can't just take something out of Silent Woods like that. Things that live here belong here. They have to stay here."

"It's not safe for them, the Woods, or the public for them to leave," Ripley concluded seriously.

A mix of emotions passed Gwen's face. Then, bitterly, she

huffed, "Why can Hafsa leave, then?"

Beside her, Hafsa shook with rage. She stomped her foot and shouted, "I'm a person, not an animal!"

Gwen froze, shaking. I tried to get up, but I couldn't get between the two of them. Hafsa lifted her fist like she might punch Gwen and I leaped to my feet.

"Don't you dare," I breathed, stumbling as my foot caught on the table leg.

Hafsa stepped back, right onto my foot, making her trip and fall backwards. Thankfully Sid was behind her and could grab her. Stunned, she yanked herself away and brushed her arms off furiously. She started to speak again but Shebal's loud growl made us all stop in an instant.

"Everyone. Stop. There is no need for fighting."

We all turned to see him and Jason standing right behind Sid and the girls. Shebal had an expression between pain and anger, while Jason just looked disappointed, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Go to your cabins. And get along," Jason said firmly. "We'll have a talk about this in an hour."

Chapter Twelve (Sid)

The fire crackled, spitting bright cinders into the navy blue sky. The leaves and branches of the trees around us whined and groaned in the rolling wind. My hands were getting increasingly weighed down by the amount of marshmallows my friends kept putting on my stick, since I had found the one with the most little branches. Across the pit, the beam of the flashlight cut wildly through the air, illuminating stripes on all the trees and the sides of our cabins as Ripley told us a story.

"I had seen its path of destruction around my house for weeks. Frogs, toads, even a few turtles, crushed and devoured, littering the neighborhood lawns. It was disgusting… And it wasn't the fault of stray or loose pets wreaking havoc on local wildlife. It was a frogcruncher!

"Frogcrunchers are sneaky creatures. They look mostly like a domestic cat, but they've got two nubby little horns between their ears, and their tail is like a lion's tail. In the tuft, there's an eyeball. They use it to see around corners, under fences, and through sewer grates, since they mostly live in the sewers in suburban neighborhoods. I've been trying to track one down for years, just to get a photo… I'd seen several over the years, but they're always too quick or too far away. This time, though, I was going to find it.

"Knowing they're most active when it rains or when it's dark out, I went back home after I made a map that showed the path of dead animals. Right before sunset, I hurried out with nothing but my phone and my books. The map brought me back to the mouth of the forest behind my neighborhood. I didn't want to use my flashlight because I didn't want to scare away the frogcruncher, so walking around in the dark was very hard. Quickly, I could hardly see the ground under my feet and was making quite a racket. I ended up sitting on a stump and waiting.

"I waited for what felt like hours. I was so tired, but I barely felt it, I was too excited. I was so close, I had to still be so close… But it never came. Until I was walking back home, my flashlight guiding my way, and it ran right across my path! It stopped in its tracks, looked up at me with its big eyes, and dropped what it was holding in its mouth. It let out this high-pitched growl and then darted away. I tried to go after it, but I stepped on the thing it dropped, a dead frog, slipped and fell on my back. And I never even got a photo."

"Ew," Gwen said, shuddering. "But, uh, that sucks…"

"That wasn't a scary story," Henry complained.

Ripley looked crestfallen.

"To be fair," I said before Henry could make fun of him, "Shebal did just say to tell stories. Not scary ones."

Shebal looked at me when I said his name. He had been staring out at the lake.

"I liked your story, Ripley. But if you want a scary story, I might have one," Jason said, taking one of the marshmallows off my stick.

Abigail gave him a concerned frown. "Don't be too depressing. I know your stories."

Beside her, Gwen nodded worriedly.

Jason laughed. "It's fine, Abigail, I have a fun idea for us. We'll tell a story together. I'll start, and the next person," he nodded at Sid, "adds something else before passing it on. I'm sure that way we'll end up with a scary story."

"What if we don't want to add anything?" Gwen asked sheepishly.

"You can say pass. No pressure." He smiled. "Alright, I'll start. It was a dark and cool summer night, just like this one…"

I squirmed when everyone looked at me. "Pass."

Hafsa gladly took my line. "A group of kids were sitting outside their camping tents, watching the stars."

"The sky was perfectly clear just like it is here, and they were amazed by the stars, since they'd lived in the city their whole lives," Ava added. Her eyes sparkled like she was remembering something fondly.

Genette picked up a stick and poked at the fire, making one of the logs fall and spray sparks into the air. "But it was getting colder without the fire going. Their parents were sleeping, and they didn't know how to start a fire, but they wanted to stay outside, because…"

"Because they'd gone out in the first place to investigate a strange sound they'd heard," Ripley said. "It sounded like, like," he forced himself to stop so Gwen had a chance.

"Like… A kitten. A lost kitten, alone in the woods."

"So they set out to find it, listening for its cries again," Abigail said.

We turned to Shebal, but he was clearly not paying attention. He laughed awkwardly and said he wasn't creative enough to carry the story.

Hafsa opened her mouth to protest.

Henry spoke right over her. "They couldn't hear it again because it got grabbed by an owl, and the owl dropped it right in front of them. They screamed and ran home. The end," he huffed, kicking a loose piece of bark into the fire.

"Stop being such a jerk!" Gwen shrieked, crossing her arms firmly over her chest. "You ruin everything."

Abigail's steady voice calmed her down. "Henry, that was a good ending to the story. Jason did say it could be scary, after all. But you did upset your sister. And there's no reason for screaming, Gwen. Please apologize to each other."

"You first," Gwen said, sticking out her tongue.

Henry rolled his eyes, stalling for a moment before mumbling an apology as though the words hurt him to say.

"I'm sorry too," Gwen said, turning up her nose at him.

"Does anyone else have a story?" Jason asked, a little uncomfortable.

"Well, I can tell you a frightening story," I said, "but it's not very… Scary."

Gwen looked relieved that someone other than Henry was talking.

I looked up at Jason for permission, or reassurance, or something.

"Go ahead," he said with a smile.

"So, one time when we were kids," I glanced at Genette, "we got out of school and walked all the way through the brush to a river that ran along part of the golf course Genette's mom worked at. Genette tried to dare me to swim across the narrowest part, which was the rapids, but I dared her back because she was eight and I was five so she had to do it first. She threatened to push me in, and then picked me up."

"I wasn't going to do anything," she protested, but she was

grinning.

"You could've told me that then," I snorted.

"I did! I think."

"Well I don't remember it like that. You just walked off and we ended up crossing a footbridge into another little neighborhood. That's when it got really frightening." I paused, but quickly realized I should have just kept talking. I didn't like everyone's eyes on me. I took a breath and resumed. "I was getting the feeling from Genette that we were lost, and my feet were getting sore, so I wanted to go up to the first house we saw to get a ride home. Genette didn't let me. We walked down the length of the first street before she caved and we knocked on someone's door. An old man came out. He was nice and drove us back to our street; Genette didn't know the address but luckily we lived on a dead end. She was so stressed the whole time but the guy was just talking about his collection of flying disks and how they're different from frisbees."

"C'mon, give me some credit, it was a lot to take in," she interrupted, her cheeks bright red.

Beside her, Ava rolled her eyes and pushed her playfully. My sister laughed.

Hafsa poked me in the arm. "What happened next?"

"Right." I blushed. "He let us out and we ran home. Genette's mom had been watching from the front step and she gave us a real earful when we got there. It was terrible. It was the end of our after school adventures, and I'd only been there for a year."

Hafsa giggled, and Ripley and Gwen seemed to like the story. Ava whispered something in a teasing tone to Genette and she pushed her back. Even the counselors were smiling to themselves. I felt very embarrassed and looked at my feet. As we moved on to Hafsa telling a short ghost story, I focused on

the snapping of the burning wood. I didn't know why I got so embarrassed every time I spoke in front of people, but I always felt like it would've been better said by someone else.

I looked up when I heard Genette speak, though; I noticed Shebal had gone back to looking out at the lake. He seemed worried.

"I have a story," my sister said, "but it's probably going to be pretty scary considering… Well, I'll tell it and you can see for yourself."

I shot her a look that I hoped conveyed less concern than I felt. Something about her talking about this made me… Feel wrong.

"Where I live, it's not as different from here as you might think. I was surprised when I first came here that other places exist with special things, secret things. But I suppose if there's one, there's bound to be more. It's only strange to me now that I ended up here, especially after getting so close to what makes the land I live on so special.

"Before I moved here to live with Sid's family, I didn't really believe in fairies, or dragons, or magic, I thought it was all stories for kids. I believed in science, things I could see and touch. So that's what I thought when my brother's grandmother told me about the wild horses living at the edge of her property, in the swamp that overtook the old farmhouse. They weren't just any horses, she said, they were horses with mouths full of sharp teeth and skin that'll stick you stronger than the strongest glue. They were wily and beautiful and fed on children like me and Sid," she gave me a glance, "but naturally, I didn't believe a word of that."

Ava couldn't suppress a giggle.

Genette smiled sheepishly and carried on. "Being my defiant

self, I wanted to see what was in that swamp. So I went out one evening with a flashlight and my muck boots, sliding along the edge of the trimmed field and the wild grass field, up to the culvert in the creek where I crossed into the furthest part of the property. It wasn't too far in, the swamp, but the sun was setting fast and the thick tangle of trees and shrubs made it harder and harder to find my way. The branches would scratch me and pull at my clothes, almost like they were telling me to give up… But I didn't want to. I knew there wasn't anything in that swamp, but for some reason I felt I had to prove that. So I kept trudging on.

"It wasn't long before the ground started to suck and squelch as I stepped. I turned my flashlight on, keeping the beam on the ground. I didn't want to misstep or catch my foot on a root and fall into the mud. It didn't save me from the hidden pits that were sealed over with thick algae, sending my foot deep into the gunk, sometimes right up to my knee, if I wasn't careful. Between that, the constant sounds of night animals, and the growing feeling that I was being watched, I was starting to jump at every little thing.

"But the worst of it was yet to come." She paused for a moment, and when she opened her mouth to continue, a shrieking sound drowned her out. A familiar bone chilling shriek, coming from the far away secret beach.

Everyone looked around in alarm as Shebal jumped up.

"Okay, let's call it a night," he said loudly, just as the cry sounded again. "Great stories. Everyone to their cabins, please."

Jason dumped his water bottle on the fire and the light vanished with a hiss. The dark made Gwen panic worse, but Ava seemed to be helping her. Hafsa grabbed my hand briefly as we hurried inside. It was barely a minute until Gwen was there

with us. From the lack of sound outside, I assumed everyone else had gotten inside, too.

We didn't talk about it. We dutifully brushed our teeth. Silently, we crawled into our beds. Under my pillow, my notebook was an uncomfortable shape until I wrote down what happened.

As I shut off my phone and put my book away again, the kelpie wailed again. I rolled over, trying to ignore it, but found myself creeping out the door anyway. As I carefully shut the door behind me, I looked out across the grass and saw a shape moving up towards me from the woods. I froze, my heart hammering, but as my eyes adjusted I could tell it was Shebal.

"What are you doing out?" he asked abruptly.

"Nothing," I said instinctively. "Uh, getting some air."

He frowned. "Get some sleep, Sid. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay, goodnight Shebal," I said awkwardly and shot back inside.

Gwen peeked out from her curtains. "Sid?"

I jumped a bit when she spoke, even though I'd seen her.

"Was that Shebal?"

I nodded.

She made a worried noise. "I think he's up to something… He's been so weird lately."

"Lately? You've known him for a few days, Gwen," Hafsa spoke up, opening her curtain a bit. "I don't think you should have any say on if he's acting weird or not."

She sighed sharply. "I'm just saying he's been… I don't know. Why's he care so much about the lake when the kelpies are out and it's dangerous?"

"Maybe it's none of your business," Hafsa snapped.

"Let's just go to sleep." I climbed back up my ladder. I was

too tired and stressed to put up with them arguing.

Both of them shut their curtains. The kelpie didn't cry again all night.

Chapter Thirteen (Ava)

The next day after lunch, Genette and I sat on the floor of our cabin with Baby's container open as we took turns placing chopped lettuce, cabbage, salami and dead mealworms into the little food dish inside the container. His fur was starting to fluff out, and we could see the silver and gray rosettes that covered his legs. We were listening to crackly country music on my phone's radio, and Genette kept teasing me for knowing many of the songs.

"It's not my fault," I protested, shoving her playfully. "Alan listens to it all the time."

She pushed me back, grinning. "Why don't you put on some music you actually like, then?"

"My phone is running out of data, I don't want to go over."

"Already? It's only the thirteenth."

"We listened to music a lot the other day, and that was videos so it took a lot of data," I explained, leaning back on my hands, feeling my long hair tickling my arms. "We can listen to your music, though."

She blushed. "I like hearing what you like."

I looked away from her, feeling my cheeks get hot. I didn't know how to accept a compliment, so I just told her I liked her music too.

"I feel like you can really get to know someone through their taste in music," she said, studying my face. "All their interests really speak about them more than they could tell you."

"I must be boring, then."

"You're not boring," she scoffed. "You don't give yourself enough credit, Ava. Thinking you're boring doesn't let you see how interesting, cool, and smart you are. Stop that thinking and everything gets easier."

"It's not that easy," I said slowly. I knew she was right, but something about it stung.

"I know," she said, then sighed. "I'm sorry. I guess I don't know how to put things lightly."

I shrugged.

She reached out her hand to me. I looked from her face to her hand and back to her face again, letting my fingers slide into hers like they meant to be there.

"No hard feelings," she said, less of a question and more of a promise, "but you do gotta change. And I'll do anything you need me to help you change. Okay?"

I stared into her eyes, set deep under her thick eyebrows, hazel and glittery like the sunrise in late summer. "Thank you," I choked out awkwardly, overwhelmed by the butterflies in my chest.

There was a knock on the door and I pulled my hand back into my lap. Baby tapped on the glass, so Genette turned her focus to refilling his bowl, so I got up and answered the door. Gwen was standing outside, looking miserable; her hair was in knots, her eyebrows were knitted together, and her eyes darted around.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I stepped aside, letting her in.

She slipped inside and pushed my curtain open so she could

sit on the edge of my bed. "It's Shebal," she said after I shut the door.

"What is?"

She chewed her lip nervously, pulling at her hair. I knew it was bad, whatever it was; she never bit her lip unless something was really bothering her. Genette looked up at me, her expression grim. I didn't settle on any one possibility, wanting to hear Gwen out before making assumptions.

"I think he's… Well. He's been so weird lately, always watching the lake and being busy with important secret stuff," she said, pulling her hair harder. She winced and I delicately touched the back of that hand, which reminded her to put her hands under her legs if she couldn't control them.

"Go on, Gwen, it's okay," I encouraged her as she got stuck again.

She looked around, as though she was scared someone else was listening in. "I think he's the one setting the traps," she blurted. "Or something. I don't know! But I don't like how he's acting. Last night he was sneaking around. Sid saw him, but I don't think he believes me."

Genette was silent, not even looking at us at this point. She was more concerned with Baby. I felt a pang of disappointment, but I didn't want to think about it until my sister was gone.

I looked at her thoughtfully, leaning my weight on one leg. "I don't think you should jump to a conclusion like that," I said carefully. "I see where you're coming from, but Shebal clearly cares a lot about this place and the things here. It doesn't make sense to me that he'd do something like that."

"Well what else is he doing out there?"

I sighed. "I don't know, Gwen. But the best thing we can do right now is keep an eye on the situation in general. Not on

Shebal specifically."

She furrowed her brows again, frowning. "I… Fine." She got up with a tearful huff. "I don't know what else it could be, though. Or who else, for that matter."

I caught her eyes as she was making her way out the door. There was a terrible, painful realization that passed between us, and she froze with her hand on the doorknob.

"No," I whispered, hoping only she could hear me. "We'll just keep an eye out. In general. Not on him."

She turned away sharply. "Fine," she repeated, and was gone.

The door shut loudly, making me jump.

"What was that about?" Genette asked me, concerned.

"Oh, you know, she's just anxious. Shebal's got something going on I'm sure that means he's not really present all the time. Family issues or something. I don't know. She overthinks." I walked to my bed, one arm firmly across my waist while my other hand held my chin.

"No, I meant what happened at the door. What did you say?"

I stopped before I sat down. "I was just talking about the same thing she was."

Genette busied herself for a moment by cleaning up Baby's food and putting the lid back on. She took a deep breath before saying, "Are you sure it wasn't about Henry? You don't have to lie to me."

I sat down heavily. It was several minutes before I spoke again. "Do you need help taking that to the kitchen?" I nodded at the dishes.

"Ava," she sighed.

My face went bright red. "Okay. Fine. I was talking about Henry."

She nodded ponderously. "It would make sense that he set

the traps," she said. "From what you've told me, he would be capable of it. And it's clear what kind of person he is."

I felt myself freezing up. I forced myself to talk through it. "Yeah… I… I don't know. He's mean, but he's not… He wouldn't."

She watched me, a warm glint in her eyes, before getting up and walking to the door. "Think about it, okay? Keep an eye on it."

I gave her one stiff nod. As soon as the door was closed, I broke down crying.

Chapter Fourteen (Sid)

Lunch on Sunday was roasted asparagus and pasta salad, neither foods I liked. I managed to get through it by listening to Ripley tell me about his experiences with testosterone. He'd done his shot in the morning after breakfast, which marked his fifth full month on testosterone.

"There's been a lot of changes really suddenly," he said, "but they do sneak up on you. The first thing I noticed was how oily I was getting, and that my acne got worse. Then my throat started hurting, and now I get voice cracks. It doesn't matter how I talk, either, my voice cracks anyway."

"I haven't noticed," I lied politely.

He giggled a bit. "I guess I've been owning it."

I picked at my food, trying to not give myself away. I felt bad for lying, even if it was something small like that. I guess I've been lying about something bigger, though.

"These days I've been getting really tired," he carried on. "It's not harder to get out of bed, and I still have issues falling asleep, but I actually want to nap during the day because I get so tired. Oh! And I'm so hungry all the time, it's hard for my moms and dads to feed me at home."

"Moms and dads?"

"Oh, yeah, didn't I mention? I have two moms and two dads.

They were married and then split up when they both realized they were gay, and now they're dating other people," he said happily. "They all get along really well. I get to see them really often, since they live in the same city. My moms are downtown and my dads are in the suburbs."

I was going to tell him I was happy for him when Jason spoke up, telling us he'd planned a cool game for us.

"It's a simple game," he said. "You'll be split into two groups, and each group holds one side of a sheet. Me, Shebal, and Abigail will gradually throw more and more ping pong balls onto the sheet and you'll do your best to knock them off, but only the ones whose color corresponds with your team. You gain one point for each of your balls that you knock off, and the other team loses one point for each of the balls that are knocked off by the opposing team. So, if the red team knocks off two red balls and one green ball, they get two points and the green team loses one from their score." He paused, then added, "Does that make sense?"

Everyone nodded reassuringly, except for Henry, who just glowered.

"What's your problem?" I heard Genette hiss.

I didn't hear his response before we were brought outside. Shebal fetched a big, circular rainbow tarp from the storage building, the same kind of tarp we would play with in kindergarten. I remembered it from when we were cleaning. Abigail carried out the box full of ping pong balls. We split into our cabin groups, making Jason notice that the groups weren't equal.

Henry's face lit up and opened his mouth to speak, but Abigail interrupted him.

"It's alright," she said. "I'll join Sid, Hafsa, and Gwen on the

Green Team."

I was glad to have her on our team, I liked her a lot. She was always very nice to me. I let her stand beside me, with Hafsa on my other side. We all held the edge of the tarp, with Genette and her team across from us. The unheld sides between us flapped in the breeze.

"Won't the balls just roll off there?" Gwen asked, nodding towards the loose sides.

Abigail shook her head. "They shouldn't, there's enough tension on the sides that are being held for them to stay roughly in the middle."

"Are we ready? Let's go!" Shebal cried, throwing two handfuls of the colored balls onto the tarp.

Gwen and Ava both squealed with excitement while my sister and their brother thrashed the tarp beside each other. I tried to be more gentle, but Hafsa was getting enthusiastic as well, bouncing the balls rapidly whenever they rolled closer to her. Abigail remained focused, strategically tipping and raising the tarp to make our green balls fall to the ground. I looked over at her, trying to copy her movements, but I kept missing good chances to knock the balls off. Getting frustrated, I lashed the tarp right as Jason dumped a dozen more ping pong balls. They shot up into the air, making us all laugh and shout.

"Isn't this so much fun?" Hafsa said, letting go of the tarp to swipe at a bounced ball.

"Hey, that's cheating!" Abigail teased.

As she put her hand back down, a cascade of balls rolled off the place she'd been holding. She scooted back to dodge them. On the other side, I saw my sister's eyes light up mischievously.

I grinned. "Watch out, Hafsa."

Genette waited until Shebal threw the next batch on, then

she whipped the tarp up sharply, lifting both Ava and Henry's arms with her, causing a landslide of green and red plastic to rain down on everybody on my side. Gwen and I yelped and bounced away as Hafsa smacked the balls to and fro.

Abigail shielded herself from the fray, laughing uncontrollably. "Okay, okay, everyone, let's call that a game," she said.

"Who won?" Ava wanted to know.

Jason and Shebal looked at the mess on the ground, then Shebal asked, "Well, did everyone have fun? Because that's as close to winning as we're gonna get with this. But that's fine! That just means we know the rules on point scoring will have to change a bit."

"It was dumb anyway," I overheard Henry muttering as he kicked some ping pong balls across the grass.

Shebal didn't seem to hear him. He talked to Jason for a minute, then told us that now the objective was to get as many of our color's balls off the tarp as fast as possible, and that Jason would be keeping time. We had one minute.

It was chaos. Balls were flying everywhere, hitting people in the arms and faces, and by the time we'd knocked them all off, we still had fifteen seconds of violent thrashing from Genette and Henry, who had been locked in a competition to see who could be more destructive. In the end, we all had a blast; even Henry smiled a bit.

Shebal made us clean it all up, but Abigail helped so it wasn't that bad. We were then allowed to do whatever we wanted for an hour. Shebal did tensely remind us to stay clear of the shore, though. Instantly I was getting ready to go out into the woods to check on the kelpie. I didn't know if I'd see anything now, in the middle of the day, but I might as well check, right?

"Why don't we play one of those board games we found in

the storage room?" Hafsa suggested.

I tried not to frown. "Sure."

She ran off to get a game while Gwen recruited Ripley as our fourth player. The three of us went into the dining building so we could sit at one of the big tables.

"Ripley," I asked, sitting down, "what do kelpies do during the day?"

His eyes lit up. "They're usually crepuscular, meaning they're most active during dawn and dusk, but they can be awake or asleep at all hours of the day and night. Generally, if they're not actively hunting, they swim, wander in the shallows or on land near water in search of food, or they soak. Soaking is similar to basking, but they just get very wet instead of warm." He took a breath. "Kelpies can't get too dry, or else they can't produce the adhesive from their pores that helps them hunt. They also start to get very agitated if they're kept out of water for too long."

I caught myself smiling, imagining the white kelpie drifting along in the lake, soaking up the sun-warmed water. "How do you know all this?"

"Well," he said, kind of sheepish, "I go on road trips with my dads and we check out hotspots for paranormal activity, so I've heard a lot about kelpies, and other animals, from people who've seen them personally. Plus, kelpies are some of the more well known mythical animals in the United Kingdom, which is where my dad's husband is from, but that also means there's a lot of info online."

Hafsa came back with the game before he could say more. We played for the full hour before the counselors got us back together for us all to play different board games, since they saw us playing one. Then we had dinner, helped clean up, and were sent off to our cabins for the evening.

With so much free time and the girls occupied with the pack of cards Genette had let Gwen borrow, I decided now was a good time to check on the kelpie. A better time than before, even, since they're crepuscular. I trekked out into the woods with my notebook and pencil, following the path up to the big rock and beyond towards the small beach. It didn't take me very long to reach it. The fine, soft sand was still littered with seashells, which shone brilliant pinks and purples in the rosy evening light. Orange and deep yellow beams of light spilled across the water, licking the shoreline in hungry, rhythmic beats. I closed my eyes, letting myself relax as the howl of the wind picked up. But I felt nothing on my skin, and no leaves rustled.

My eyes snapped open.

He was standing in the shallows, not ten feet away.

My breath was absolutely taken away. I struggled to find words as he held my gaze with his soulful blue eyes. His mouth, long and unnatural, opened slightly as he let out a soft, low whistle. He lifted a hoof gingerly and I flinched so he set it back down where it had been.

"That's not normal," I blurted. "You're not supposed to be respectful."

He whistled again, the breathy sound tapering out to a series of watery pops. He took a step forward, the water moving like velvet around his long, strong legs.

"You're supposed to… Eat me," I murmured, not sure why I was still talking.

He kept walking towards me until his hooves met the sand. The water slid around them, pulled back, slid around them again. A calm heartbeat, so unlike mine.

"Aren't you?"

His graceful neck trembled as he stretched towards me,

strangely placed eyes locked on mine, mouth delicately closed. I felt myself being pulled towards him, an arm outstretched, palm up. I felt his warm, wet breath on my skin, the smell of old, mildewy driftwood filling my nose. My hand was inches from his muzzle. If I leaned forward just a little more, not even a step, I would touch him. I could touch him. I didn't feel even the slightest bit like he'd hurt me.

I remembered what Ripley had said about their adhesive skin and I shuffled back a few steps. He shook his head, snorting.

"Come out of the water," I said, trying not to let the tremble in my voice take over, "so I know I can trust you."

He stepped forward, his head lowered so our eyes were at equal heights. I retreated with each step he took, surprised that he was taking so much care to match my pace. Peering around him cautiously while trying not to break eye contact for too long, I waited until all four of his hooves were on dry land before I stopped. I was standing about a foot into the grass, a bramble scraping the back of my leg.

The kelpie lifted his head and blew at me. I read somewhere that a horse would remember you if you blew into its nose, but I didn't feel like that was a great idea right now. I was a little shaken that he understood my words, but I guess that was fine because he had done what I'd asked. So I guess I should trust him.

I lifted my hand again, shaking. His steady blue gaze filled me with calmness again. Reaching forward until my palm bristled with the closeness of his body. Delicately, I rested my hand on his snout, then I pulled away quickly. All dry. No adhesive.

I smiled a bit, and something about the way he looked at me told me he was smiling, too.

"My name is Sid," I whispered. "I know you can't tell me yours,

but I'd like you to know mine."

He blew against my hand, warm and damp. It tickled.

"I write about you," I went on, lifting my notebook for him to see, "in this book. Whenever I hear you at night, whenever I, um, dream about you. I wrote about when I first saw you."

He drew his head back, his ears twitching passively. He seemed pleased, but not exactly proud. Just… Happy.

The question formed on my tongue, but before I could ask, he turned and walked back down the shore. I watched him, my heart squeezing. He looked over his shoulder as his front feet met the water, and he nickered. I couldn't figure out how to ask if he wanted me to follow him, so I took a few steps forward. I felt so drawn to him; it was easy to follow him right to the edge of the water, where I had to stop or I'd get my shoes wet. He walked out a few feet, breathing in sync with the lapping of the waves. Carefully, I took off my shoes and socks. I tossed them up the bank after stuffing my socks into my shoes. As the kelpie walked out, so did I, dodging shells, stones, and slimy algae clumps. I went out until the water touched the hems of my shorts.

"I have to stop now," I whispered, delicately placing my hand on the kelpie's side before realizing what I was doing. Bright panic shot through me and I stumbled back, splashing, clutching my hand. The kelpie only looked back at me, his clear eyes mournful.

Several feet away from him, I was still holding my hand. I looked from him to my undamaged palm and back to him. Then I apologized.

He tossed his head as if to tell me not to worry, and for a moment we both breathed in the cool, musty lake air. As the blood-red sunset illuminated him, I said goodnight, and went

on my way.

Back in the cabin, I hoped the walk had dried my legs off enough that nobody noticed. I shoved my socks, wet from being on my wet feet, into my laundry bag. Hafsa was in bed with her curtain closed, but I heard her flipping the page of a book. Gwen threw open her curtain as I slipped into the bathroom.

"Oh, Sid, you're back," she said, then sighed loudly. "I just can't get calm enough to sleep."

I only just heard Hafsa grumble something.

"Sorry, Gwen," I mumbled around my toothbrush.

"I'm going to get some tea to help me sleep," she said as she put on her shoes.

As soon as the door shut, Hafsa opened her curtain and said to me, "Where were you all evening? I'd been wanting to ask you something…"

I finished brushing my teeth and asked what was up. My heart was in my throat; I tried not to act like it.

She dropped her gaze, lifting her blanket up over her shoulders to cover herself. "I… Um, I'd overheard something a few nights ago is all."

"What is it?"

She struggled with the words for a minute. "That you maybe have a crush on somebody at camp?"

I titled my head to the side. "I… No. I don't." I couldn't think of who said that, or what made someone think so in the first place.

For some reason, she looked utterly disappointed. "Oh. Nevermind then. Goodnight Sid."

"Goodnight," I said, caught off guard. What had I done? I closed the bathroom door as she closed her curtain, deciding

this was too much to think about right now. I had the kelpie on my mind, and he felt far more important than stuff here, especially pointless gossip.

Chapter Fifteen (Ava)

A dragonfly darted over the water, following an erratic zigzag pattern as it investigated clumps of aquatic plants sticking out of the water, sniping a bug or two along the way. The surface of the lake was dotted by dozens of little circles where water striders walked, and tiny green lotuses floated near the shoreline. I closed my eyes for a moment to better focus on a loon's call when a loud whizzing broke the air: a fishing line being reeled back in at top speed. I looked up to see Henry laughing as he yanked his rod back, perched precariously on the edge of the boat. Jason was telling him to sit back down while Gwen, Sid, and Hafsa looked on in alarm.

I rolled my eyes and glanced tiredly at Genette, who just frowned at him.

"He's always like that, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah. I mean, he's usually afraid of water, but still. I think he's just showing off." I watched him making a fool of himself. "Imagine living with him, and going to school with him."

"You're brave, Ava."

We both laughed and I reeled my line in a bit, just to keep it moving. She, Ripley, and I were fishing on the dock while Abigail watched us. Luckily the dock was fairly wide, so we didn't have to worry about us all casting in the same spot. I

was glad things had been calm enough for us to fish. The warm summer sun was making me too sleepy to pay attention, though, which was fine because I'd had no luck with the fish anyway. Ripley was in the same boat; he had his rod between his knees so he could sketch some interesting water plants. I was going to ask him about them when my rod jerked to the side.

"You got something," Genette said.

I gave a little nod, pulling the line along and testing the resistance. It was definitely alive, moving in an arc away from me. I reeled it in, slowly for the first few turns to make sure I didn't rip the hook out of its mouth, then quickly before it could let go. It was a decently big smallmouth bass; everyone congratulated me on the catch. I handed it over to Abigail so she could kill and dress it. She wasn't good at fishing, she said, but I admitted she was better than even me at dressing a fish.

The boat passed us noisily. Henry was talking about how it was better to fish by the cliffs than the space between the two islands. He cited several shallow spots as the reason, which struck me as odd because we hadn't really been there.

Genette noticed too; she gave me a weird look and asked if she'd missed a tour.

Abigail shook her head. "Why?"

"Henry just seems to know the lake a bit better than I'd expect." Genette filled her in on what he'd said.

She frowned. "It's as good a guess as any. There's a stepping stone path there," she said, but I wasn't sure if she was convinced or not.

I looked over at Ripley for his opinion, but he was enthralled by a softly glowing dragonfly that landed on his knee. I smiled and let him be.

Later, we were gathered together to compare catches. Overall,

I'd done better than Henry, but not as good as Sid, who caught four pike. Genette ruffled his hair in congratulations and he hugged her awkwardly. I caught myself smiling like an idiot with no idea why.

"This is an excellent haul," Jason said. "Six pike, three bass, and a walleye. We'll be eating these for the next several days. But now we need to find fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs to eat too."

"We've put together a list of edible plants and their poisonous lookalikes," Abigail said with a smile. "I will give each of you a copy of one of the lists. You'll have to get together with someone who has the other list in order to safely harvest the plants. Again, I'll help so there's an even amount of people."

"Don't worry, the lists are clearly marked," Shebal added. "And Jason and I will be checking your harvests to make sure you haven't made any mistakes. You have two hours to forage, but I'll blow a whistle when the time is up just in case you aren't paying attention."

"Make sure to only take a small amount from each patch, and space it out, so that there'll be enough for the wildlife and for the campers next year," Jason concluded.

Abigail handed out the sheets, as well as a basket for each of us, and we split into groups. Unfortunately, both Genette and I had the edible list. I looked around to see who needed a partner; Henry walked towards us and I sighed.

"What, don't want to be my partner?" he sneered.

"No, not particularly," I muttered.

He leaned over me. "What was that?"

Genette stood up, getting in his face. "I'll be your partner."

He blinked. "What?"

She grabbed his sheet. "Poisonous. There, I've got the other

one, so we're partners." She stormed off. "Done and done!"

Henry whirled around and chased after her. "Hey! You need to give that back! You're cheating!"

I watched them go, worried for Genette. I tried to shake it off. Henry wouldn't hurt her.

I looked around. Abigail had teamed up with my sister, and Hafsa and Sid were together. Ripley scurried over to me with a big smile on his face. I returned it.

"Do you have the poisonous list?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Great, let's go."

It didn't take us long to find something.

"I bet they're wild carrots," I said, sitting down to look at the tall, white-flowered plants. "Look, the closed flowers do look like bird's nests, like the sheet says. The stems are fuzzy and they've got those small leaves underneath."

Ripley nodded. "The bracts. Let me see the leaves, though. I'm worried it's hemlock because we're so close to water."

I scooted back as he examined the leaves carefully. After a moment, he nodded again.

"I'll still make sure they smell like carrots," I said as he dug one up. The roots were definitely like tiny carrots, but they were white. "That can't be right."

"It is! Carrots are naturally white. Or purple."

"That's really neat! So is this a carrot or what?"

He smelled it. "That's a carrot!"

I gave him a high five and we collected several. I put them in my basket and we kept looking.

We quickly overheard Gwen talking to Abigail, worried about how much time has gone by.

"It's okay, Gwen," Abigail said. "Shebal will whistle after two

hours anyway."

"I know, I just want to do it right."

I looked at Ripley. "Should we go somewhere else?"

He nodded. We carried on deeper into the woods, coming across a fallen tree. On the other side, through a tall brambly thicket, I could just make out Henry and Genette.

"Can you pay attention for one minute? We have to identify this mushroom so we know if it'll kill us or not."

"Why can't you just do it yourself?"

"We're supposed to be working together. Believe me, I don't want to do it any more than you do."

"Then just don't!" Henry threw up his arms and stomped a few feet away. "This is so pointless anyway. I'm not gonna eat any of this crap. I'd rather walk to that corner store and get a bag of beef jerky or something."

Genette scoffed. "With what money?"

Henry turned around. "With what money?" he repeated mockingly. "Did you seriously not bring any money?"

She didn't respond.

He laughed incredulously. "Did your parents not give you money? You're old enough for a job, didn't you bring your own?"

I made a fist, crinkling the paper loudly. "He doesn't even have a job," I spat.

Ripley gave me a worried glance. "Ava…"

There was a loud crunch of branches and the top of the thicket was swept away. Henry glared at me and shouted at me to mind my business picking flowers.

"You mind your business!" I shot back, putting my hand on the tree and vaulting over it. I skirted around the thicket to stand near where Genette was still crouching. "Just because

you mooch off Alan and Aileen doesn't make you any better than Genette. Now follow the rules and help her."

He crossed his arms and looked down his nose at me. "Or what?"

I hadn't thought that far.

"Or I'll be feeding you poisonous mushrooms whether you like it or not," Genette snapped, standing up. She marched over and grabbed the sheet from him, then stabbed it with her finger to show him something. "Yellow stainers turn yellow when handled. The mushroom I was touching with a stick was turning yellow."

"So?"

"They're poisonous! I thought it was a horse mushroom, I was going to pick it."

He huffed, kicked a rock, and snatched the sheet back. "Fine. Whatever." He sighed. "There's a good patch of cattails this way. They're edible."

Genette thanked me with a quick squeeze of my shoulder before following him into the bush. I sighed as I watched her go.

"Come on," Ripley said, coming up behind me. "Let's go."

I nodded and followed him, trying not to think about how much I wanted to be with Genette. It was really fun to hang out with Ripley, though. We shared a passion for the outdoors and he could identify many of the animals we encountered. It was cool to learn so much from a fellow camper.

When the two hours were up, Ripley and I had gotten a little bounty of dandelion leaves, chives, and wild strawberries along with the carrots.

"Great work everyone," Shebal announced when he'd finished checking everything over. "No mistakes! That's amazing for

your first time. Congratulations."

"Not everyone's first time," Henry remarked.

Shebal gave him a nod. "Right. How many of you have done this before?"

We all raised our hands.

Jason laughed heartily.

"I should have figured!" Shebal said with a broad grin. "Alright, the three of us will prepare a nice dinner for you all. You've earned it! It'll be a bit later than normal is all, but we'll let you sleep in tomorrow, even though it'll be a Tuesday."

There was a murmur of thanks through the group as the counselors let us go to do our own thing. Ripley stayed with me as Gwen and Sid walked up to us; Hafsa hurried over after speaking to her brother. Genette gave Henry a few curt words before joining us too. We crowded around two of the logs by the fire pit, laughing and chatting about how today went. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Henry sulking off to the edge of the trees. I craned my neck to see him; he glanced over his shoulder and looked at me. His face was full of so much… Darkness, I couldn't look for long. Squinting at the charred logs, I thought maybe I was just seeing our father in him. After all, he was kind of growing up to look like him…

I let out a sharp, sudden sigh, shaking myself.

Genette put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay, Ava?"

"Yeah!" I said, a bit too loudly. "Fine. I'm fine. What were we talking about?"

Genette looked to the side and frowned a bit. "I was just saying that it's a little bit suspicious how much your brother knows about the island and the lake, considering the situation with the traps…"

Ripley and Gwen both nodded in agreement.

"No more traps have been found," I said, trying to hide the tremble in my voice. I wasn't sure if I was saying that to defend Henry or not.

Genette looked thoughtful. "Has anyone seen the original trap?"

Gwen looked uncomfortable. "I mean, I was… I saw when…"

"No, I mean like, since then. Since it's been confiscated."

We all looked around at each other and shook our heads. Then Gwen looked guilty.

I gave her a look. "What, Gwen?"

She took a deep breath, pulling at her hair. "I, um, I maybe saw it?"

"Tell us," Sid said. "It's okay."

"The other night I went to the counselor's cabin because I wanted to get some tea because I was having trouble sleeping and the door was locked so I went to get someone and Abigail brought me inside and made me some of her tea and it was just kind of there on the table," she got out in a rush, then took another deep breath. "I didn't want to ask about it because, um, she'd probably not tell me anyway… I don't know if it was the trap though. It could have been anything!"

"Well, what did it look like?" Ripley asked, leaning forward.

She described a snare trap similar to a fox trap, but made for something bigger. My heart sank; we both knew who knew how to make a fox trap.

Ripley looked anxious. "Can we go find it?"

We all looked at him.

He blushed. "Henry showed me how to tie some knots, and he showed me a couple traps too, so I think if I see it, I could tell if it was his work or not."

Why did he bring traps?

"I could say I left something in there…" Gwen said slowly.

I felt faint.

"If we ask Shebal, that might be better than asking Abigail," Sid said right away. "Abigail might suspect something."

Ripley nodded. "Abigail doesn't like her stuff being touched, too, so she's less likely to let us in."

"Shebal's on edge right now. Let's ask Jason," Hafsa added.

"Great point, Hafsa. Okay, who's coming with Gwen and I?"

Gwen interrupted. "It should just be me and you. Too many people will look bad."

We all agreed, but I still felt dizzy and weird. We waited at the fire pit as the two hurried into the dining hall. Through the window, Hafsa could see them, so she was nonchalantly giving us a play by play. They ran up to the serving window. A few seconds later Jason was there. Then he went to the door and they were being walked out.

"… why you've both gotta go if it's just Gwen's stuffed toy," Jason was saying as they passed us.

"It's not just a stuffed toy!" Gwen sniffed dramatically. "I've had him my whole life!"

"Okay, okay, I understand. Let's find him."

I smiled weakly. My sister was a nervous wreck, but she did understand how to manipulate adults if she had to.

Then we waited. Several tense moments went by. I could barely breathe and my head was spinning. Genette slowly let her hand rest over mine. My heart fluttered and I had to close my eyes.

I heard the door creak as it opened. I looked up.

"Sorry, Gwen," Jason said, his hands on his hips. "I'll look around again tonight, okay?"

She looked terribly sad. "I'll look in my cabin too. Um, more

thoroughly I mean."

Jason walked back to the dining hall as Ripley and Gwen joined us. The door closed behind him and she erupted into tearful giggles.

"That was exciting," she said, frantically wiping her cheeks as her smile turned into a trembling frown. "But… But…"

Ripley gave her a calming look and nodded solemnly.

"I knew it," Genette said harshly. "I knew it was him."

My heart was racing to match my thoughts. I had to stop pretending eventually, between the traps, how much he knew about this place, and his sneaking around. He was so angry, too, but that's just how he is, right? He's a jerk, not a killer. Even with that look.

He did look just like…

I shook my head hard and stood up quickly, so quickly I felt like I'd fall over. I forced myself to walk, stepping over the log and crossing the grass, down the slope to the small beach by the bridge, onto the bridge and far, far away from here. Far away from him.

"Ava! Wait, where are you going?" Genette called after me.

I wanted to say something, but my body wanted to puke instead. With a shudder I swallowed the stinging acid reflux and trudged on. My shoes skidded a few times on the damp wood, but I didn't let that stop me, breathing heavy between biting back the beginnings of sobs. As soon as I reached the opposite shore, I ran up the grass to the small driveway, then on to the shoulder of the road. I jogged for a while until the sparse trees by the road were between me and the island. Then I paused for a moment to catch my breath, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand. I couldn't stop. I had to keep running.

It took me about five minutes to reach the turn in the road

that brought me up to the corner store. I crossed the parking lot, passing the outdoor display of canoes, pushing open the door with effort; I was tired from running. A little bell rang above the door to alert the shopkeeper, but there was already somebody standing behind the counter.

He was a great big man, with long, silky black hair falling around his massive shoulders. His face was a bit flattened and he had a wide nose and a small chin. He seemed to have two small tusks poking up over his upper lip. His skin was a stony green, which made my head spin, but really after all that's happened, who am I to be surprised by that?

"Hi," he said, putting down the newspaper he was reading. "How may I help you today?"

I paused, trying to catch my breath quickly. I was sweaty and hot and embarrassed.

He gave me an easy smile. "I know what you'd like," he said, stepping through the door at the back, presumably into the staff room. He came back with a glass of lemonade, so cold it was dripping condensation. He put it down on the counter and slid it over to me.

"I left my wallet at camp," I managed to pant, eyeing the drink.

"Don't worry about it, it's on the house." He leaned on the counter. "Camp, huh? Are you with Jason?"

I eagerly grabbed the glass and nodded. "You know him?"

He laughed warmly. "He and I go way back, that old bear! I'm glad he's keeping up that camp of his. It's good for him to be hanging out with other people, and I'm sure it's good for you kids to get out here too. Are you enjoying it?"

I noisily sipped the lemonade through a bendy straw, trying to figure out how to answer that. "I like the place, yeah," I said after I'd finished the whole glass.

He took it back. "You're thirsty. Has he got you working too hard?"

I shrugged. "It's not that. I…" I got choked up again. Frowning hard, I pushed my hair back over my shoulders to busy myself.

His face softened. "You can talk to me. What's your name?"

"Ava."

"I'm Big Gus."

I smiled awkwardly, then dropped my gaze to the floor. "It's just… I don't know. My brother's doing something terrible, or at least that's what everyone thinks. What they all want me to think…" I sighed, frustrated. "It makes sense, but I don't want it to."

He nodded. "I understand."

"It's made sense for years, too. He always sided with our father, he's always picking on me and Gwen and sometimes I think he's going to—" A sob cut me off and I wrapped my arms around myself. Everything was coming crashing down.

"It's okay, Ava," Big Gus said calmly, handing me a tissue.

I breathed in shakily, then took it and blew my nose. "I don't want him to have done this. He has it in him to be good, I know it. He has to."

He let me cry for a few moments, and when I was done, he gave me a little plate with cheese and crackers, more lemonade, a cool blanket, and a box of tissues. He unfolded one of the camping chairs he was selling and let me sit in it beside the counter. We chatted idly about what I've done at camp, and he told me about some of the things he's built with Jason for nearby towns. He treated me normally, like I hadn't just broken down.

After a while, the little bell sounded. I looked up to see a short, fat person standing there with an aviator's hat loosely sitting

over a mess of short, spiky blond hair. She had huge, fully black eyes, and skin the color of wet ice. Her face was round like Sid's. She was wearing a black leather jacket, a red t shirt, and riding pants. On her feet were tall boots with grippy soles.

"Hey Gus! How's it going? Where's Gus?" she said, sliding up to the counter and grabbing a pack of mints from the display.

"Good, Marilda," he said pleasantly. "He's sleeping. Don't you think you can get away with stealing that."

She smacked him on the wrist with it and they both laughed.

I looked up at them, trying not to look bewildered.

Big Gus smiled broadly. "Ava, Little Gus is my husband. And this is Marilda, our adopted daughter for a while. She's studying not too far from here so we're giving her a place to stay."

I nodded slowly. "Nice to meet you."

"You too," she said, popping a mint in her mouth. "Who are you?"

"Ava?" I mumbled, then realized what she was asking. "I go to Jason's camp."

"Cool. How is it? I only heard about it this year and I'm too old to go now."

"It's pretty nice. I've learned a lot about… This place. But I was always good with nature so the foraging, fishing, and general woodsman stuff is kind of repetitive." I smiled a bit. "I still love it."

She nodded, leaning on the counter and nearly knocking over a rack of lighters. "I take it this is your first time learning that magic is real?"

I laughed. "Yeah I guess. Unless you count being a little kid."

Gus grinned. "Kids know a lot more than adults may think!"

Marilda took off her hat and ruffled her hair, showing her pointed ears. "I'm from here, believe it or not. I live way north

of here, in the Wintry Mountains. I'm a snow elf. I'm studying in Kentsville, a practical course. Dragon riding."

I took in the information with an ongoing nod. She seemed pleased with herself that I was a little dumbfounded. After a couple awkward minutes of watching her fill Gus in on how her day had gone, I told her I liked her hair.

She gave me a proud grin. "I think you'd look good with a haircut like this."

I blushed all the way up to my ears. "I… I don't think I could pull it off."

"Of course you could! Here, Gus, get me some scissors and a mirror."

I opened my mouth to protest but thought against it as Gus dipped into the back. Marilda was smirking at me, studying me. Gus came back and she went right to work.

"Don't forget to sweep that up, Marilda," Gus said as she chopped away at my long hair. I shut my eyes tight after Gus took my glasses. I felt it falling off me in chunks, then strands; it was a lot heavier than I had assumed. I felt a great weight lifted as she touched it up. My glasses were placed on my face gently. Finally, she told me to look.

My eyes flew open and I saw my face in the mirror. A face I barely understood was mine. My hair was cropped right close to my face, puffed out on all sides in a cute, boyish cut. I was still blushing. For some reason, my first thought was about what Genette would think of me now.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes!" I said, unexpectedly, then laughed.

Marilda laughed too. "I'm so happy. I've never done that before. I was sure I'd mess it up."

"I hope you take a safer attitude to dragon riding," Gus said,

patting her playfully on the back.

"Hey, don't hit me! I have scissors!"

I stayed with them for a while, enjoying how easily they got along. They teased each other, and sometimes they got a little snappy, but it was always clear that it was a joke. They loved each other. I basked in the love.

Marilda spoke a lot about missing home. She lived in a large castle built out of the mountain itself, running deep and wide inside the stone. The long winter ended one week in July, where the snow melted on the mid plains, halfway between her snowy mountain home and the flood plains at the bottom of the mountain. The meltwater rushed down to flood the grasslands, so the elves living there stayed up in their homes on stilts. The mid plain flora grew rapidly, so the snow elves went out to harvest, hunt, and trade. This went on until late August, when the snow began to fall again. They had a festival then, eating fresh greens and drinking sweet nectar, eating up the supplies that wouldn't be able to be preserved for the winter. Then they busied themselves by drying and curing the harvest to last for the rest of the year. It sounded wonderful, but even more wonderful was the great dance held at the first snowfall, along with the feast: the Snow Ball. Marilda really missed it; she'd been staying at Shimmering Lake since the start of the year and wouldn't be back home until September.

I wondered what it was like to be away from a home you loved for that long, feeling a lasting pang of sadness.

At around seven, Gus got a phone call.

"That was Jason," he said, coming out of the back room. "Dinner's being served in five minutes. Want to go home?"

I looked at the blanket and chair, then at Marilda and Gus. Something about his question made me feel like there was a

way to say no. But I didn't want to. I helped them clean up, thanked them, and was on my way.

Chapter Sixteen (Sid)

I struggled through the reeds, trying to pull myself to the surface of the lake. My clothes were so waterlogged they made it even harder to move as sticky, slimy plants wrapped themselves around my limbs. My lungs burned, my eyes stung, my body started to feel like fuzzy jelly… I was drowning. Was I really drowning here? Was I going to die?

White, brilliant white filled my mind. This is death, it must be. But does death have a velvet mouth? Does death pull me up to the shore?

My eyes flew open. Blue, brilliant blue, then—

AC hum. Raw wood walls. My familiar, soft blanket. Me, soaked in sweat and panting.

I sat up and pushed my hair out of my eyes; it was damp and stuck to my skin. Some nightmare, I guess. I crept down the ladder, careful not to disturb Gwen and Hafsa as I went to the bathroom. I cleaned myself tiredly, studying my face in the mirror. I looked like I'd been dragged out of the lake, that's for sure. I sighed heavily and crawled back to bed. But before my head hit the pillow, I felt the most sickening pull in my stomach.

White fur. Blue eyes. Who else?

I swallowed hard, fishing out my notebook, and I wrote about the dream. About him. I didn't want to try to think about what

it could mean, but it was hard not to. A kelpie saving someone trapped in the lake… That couldn't be possible. They'd much rather get an easy meal. Even if it was the white kelpie, I'm sure of it.

Shoving my notebook and pencil back under my pillow, I pushed the thoughts away. I was being silly; it was just a dream.

The morning came far too early, even though it was a late wake-up call. I groaned as Hafsa told me to get out of bed. She asked if I was feeling sick again.

"A bit," I said, then hurried to brush my teeth. I didn't want to talk about it.

Breakfast was pancakes with fresh gooseberries and currants. I ate happily, listening to Hafsa tell us about how she'd been foraging here for years.

"Since I could walk, my parents have been showing me how to hunt, fish, and forage for myself and our community. It's just part of living here. And I'm much better at fishing when I can use my claws," she said, giving me a smirk.

"What? Just because you only caught one fish doesn't mean you're bad at it," I shot back with a smile.

"Oh, just because some of us didn't catch anything doesn't mean you're the best," Gwen pouted, but there was a playful twinkle in her eyes.

After we'd cleaned up, Jason told us we had a full day of learning how to make furniture out of wood. He was going to do a demonstration of how to build a chair, then we would all work together on two, one for each cabin.

"What are we going to do with them?" Genette asked.

Jason scratched the back of his neck. "Well, I was talking with Gus yesterday and he needs another chair while he's got a guest, so that's where mine is going. But I was thinking we could just

keep your two in your cabins for future campers to use. I'll throw together another chair for the third cabin when I've got some free time."

Shebal nodded. "I think that's a fine idea. Take it away, Jason. I don't have a handy bone in my body."

I caught Hafsa looking relieved at her brother's chipper attitude. I hoped she wasn't too worried about him, but I wasn't sure how to ask without sounding intrusive. She'd been very clear about whatever it is not being anyone's business but Shebal's.

Just as we were heading outside, I noticed Ava. She looked completely different! Her long brown hair had been cut short. It wasn't nearly shaved down like mine, but it was much, much shorter than it had been yesterday.

"Uh, Ava," I said sheepishly, "I really like your new haircut."

She turned around and blushed. "Thanks," she said with a meek smile. "It was kind of a rushed decision."

"It looks nice," I went on. "A lot like Henry's."

Her eyes flashed. Her whole face went red, right to the roots of her hair. Without saying a single word she stormed away, throwing the door open and running up the clearing again to the bridge.

"Oh, now you've done it," Genette snapped. "She's running away again."

I flinched. "I, I didn't mean," I stammered, but Genette was gone too. She only went as far as the beach, I could see through the big windows, then she turned around and walked back up to where Jason was starting to set up his demonstration. From just inside the door, I watched Shebal talk quietly to Jason for a moment, then heard Jason announcing that the chair building would take place tomorrow and that today was a mental health

day.

Gwen walked back over to the dining hall. She didn't look as worried as I thought she would. In fact, she was very excited to take me and Ripley on a walk through the woods.

"Are you sure?" I asked, following her out to Ripley's cabin, where he was tying his shoelaces.

She nodded vigorously. "It's a lovely day, I thought a walk would be nice."

"To clear our heads?"

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Ripley waved excitedly as we approached. "I'm glad you invited me! But what about Hafsa? Doesn't she usually hang out with you two?"

Gwen fidgeted with her hair. "She didn't want to come. Let's go."

I frowned. Looking behind me, I couldn't see Hafsa. She must already be inside.

Gwen took us into the woods along the trail to the big rock. My heart was hammering. Had she somehow found out about my kelpie? Is that why Hafsa wasn't here? What was Gwen going to do about it? My eyes kept searching the woods, looking for any sign that something might be up, even though I really had no clue what I was looking for.

Wait.

My kelpie? Had I called him… Mine?

I shook myself, feeling odd and sick all of a sudden. That didn't feel right, but it did all the same.

Ripley glanced over at me. "What's up, Sid?"

"Oh… I'm just feeling a little sick is all. I slept weird."

He nodded knowingly. "If you'd like to go back—"

"No! No. I'd like to stay."

He smiled. "Great!" Then he hurried a few steps ahead and asked Gwen where we were headed.

I knew she was taking us close to the beach, but not on the same trail I took. The trees here opened up between wide patches of swampy ground, and the underbrush was made of tall, thick ferns. The air was musty and green. Thousands of mosquitoes rained down on us, but Gwen didn't seem bothered. Ripley was swatting them away with a fern leaf he'd picked up, and I was still too anxious to really notice. Every once in a while, I'd smack one and leave a bloody stain on my arm.

Eventually, through the sparse trees, I could see the glimmering lake not far to the left.

"Have you found another secret beach?" Ripley asked, and my heart jumped out of my chest for a moment before remembering he'd been here last year too. "We're pretty far from it now, but we're close to the lake. I don't see any sign of sand or even an approachable shore, though… Look how thick the swamp gets right before the lakeside."

I nodded. "I don't want to try walking through that."

"You'd probably lose your shoes!"

Gwen laughed, but it sounded nervous and high pitched. "Uh, no, I'm just walking around. Isn't it nice out here?"

"It's pretty buggy," I said.

Ripley agreed.

I noticed Gwen was paying a lot of attention to the ground, like she was looking for something in the ferns. I let her get a bit ahead before asking Ripley if he thought she was acting a little strange.

He frowned, pausing his rhythmic swaying of the fern fan. "I don't know… Maybe. She does seem a little more nervous than usual."

"And she looks like she's looking for something."

"Did you find an animal out here? One you couldn't identify?" Ripley asked her. "If you did, I could—"

"No!" she practically shouted. "I just thought this would be a nice place for a walk. Isn't it?"

We both nodded, but when she turned away, Ripley gave me a serious look.

After a while more of walking, we made our way back to camp. Gwen seemed more on edge than she had been going in. Ripley talked about the local wildlife in an attempt to get Gwen to open up, but she just kept smiling, nodding, and laughing appropriately. I wasn't sure what to think. She'd avoided the kelpie's beach completely, but she'd taken us on a really unnerving hunt for something in a swamp. I frowned hard. She wouldn't be the one setting traps. Maybe she was looking for them? And I guess looking in the swamp made sense, because kelpies like swampy areas, and the first trap caught a kelpie…

I shuddered at the thought. What would anyone here want to do with a kelpie? Henry of all people, too. He had thought this place was a joke or something at first. What could he possibly be looking for in catching a kelpie? I didn't think Gwen would have any answers for me, even if that was what she was looking for; she was too anxious. I considered asking Ava for a second before remembering what had happened this morning.

It was lunchtime when Ava came back. We were eating fish tacos with a salad of dandelion leaves, carrots, and sheep sorrel leaves. The sheep sorrel was very bitter, but I liked it, so I ended up with a lot of it. When Ava walked in, Genette was dumping hers on my plate. Ava made a beeline for Genette, but noticed the salad.

"Hey, don't eat that much sheep sorrel," she said. "It blocks

your body's ability to absorb nutrients if you eat too much. Give it back to everyone who gave you their portion."

I apologized, not knowing what else to say, and everyone took theirs back.

Genette also apologized, then looked up at Ava. "Oh, I love your hair," she said.

I looked up too. It was bleached blonde, nearly white. I told her I liked it too, then said sorry for earlier.

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it, Sid."

Genette bit her lip and pointedly didn't look at me as she brought her plate back to her seat. I still felt a tiny bit hurt, but I forgave her. I love her and I know she loves me too.

Ava went up to the counselor's table to ask for some food and that was that. It was like the whole thing never happened. For the best, I suppose.

After lunch, I slipped away to the woods before anyone could ask something more of me. I ran through the forest along the path I always took, passing the big rock, dodging most of the branches that grabbed at me. When my shoes finally sank into the sand and crunched the sparkling shells, I stumbled to a stop and saw he was standing there.

"Were you waiting for me?"

He nickered softly.

"How did you know I was looking for you?"

He flicked his ears back and looked to his left, in the direction of the swamp Gwen had brought us to. I narrowed my eyes and asked how he knew. He just walked closer and blew on my hands.

"I guess I should know better than to question a kelpie," I said lightly.

He stared at me, his brilliant blue eyes eating away at me.

Brilliant blue…

My dream came back to me all at once and I gasped. His ears perked up and he snorted. It came out in a rush as I spoke to him, feeling not at all out of place telling the kelpie about a nightmare that was seemingly about him. He watched me steadily the whole time, taking in my words, listening. I could truly believe he was listening. When I finished, he growled softly, brushing his nose against my hand. I didn't pull away or flinch. I didn't lean into his touch at first, but something about him felt so safe and welcoming…

"I'm not in danger around you, am I?"

He made a sound like purring, and I smiled. I knew.

He stepped away from me, nosing my hand gently, then turned and walked down the bank to the shore. I told him I wouldn't get in the water in the middle of the day, but he tossed his head and snorted. I frowned, watching him walk along the shore to the edge of the beach, where the sand was overtaken by thick ferns. The same ferns that grew in the swamp. He pawed at them with a hoof, then looked back at me, ears back.

I didn't know what he wanted. I walked across the sand to him. He pawed the fern again so I swept it aside with my foot, but there was nothing there. I gave him a confused look and he shook his head.

"I don't know what you're telling me. I'm sorry."

He pushed his nose into the crook of my elbow. I delicately stroked his silky, wet mane. He lifted his head, very careful not to push me, and took a few steps back so his back feet were in the water. He nickered softly, stretching his neck towards me. He seemed to have left behind whatever he was trying to tell me and now he wanted me to follow him into the water.

"I don't want to get my clothes wet when I have to go back in

them."

He snorted and retreated into the water, then reared up halfway, splashing me with a spray of water from his front hooves. I laughed and lifted my arms to try to minimize the damage. He danced sideways, splashing water around him. I watched him for a minute, unable to help a smile, then heaved a huge sigh and rolled my eyes.

"Oh, alright, you win," I said. As I started to lift my shirt off, I suddenly got self conscious. I was just over two hundred pounds, and while I tried not to mind that, it was only really my family and my friends here who didn't think I was ugly, gross, and unhealthy. On top of that, I didn't wear a binder; I was wearing a sports bra. It was ridiculous and I knew that, kelpies probably didn't have the same ideas about bodies and gender that humans did, but they were people too. They had human bodies too. So if I took my shirt off, he'd know.

Seeing me paused for so long, he got concerned and stepped forward.

"I… I'm just shy." I pulled my shirt off quickly. "Don't judge me, okay?"

He nickered again, turning and walking into the lake. I wondered if he was leaving me, but he looked over his shoulder and whistled, telling me to hurry up. I smiled from ear to ear and ran down the shore, kicking off my shoes and socks.

We swam together for hours. The water was warm from the sun and I felt at home alongside him. I kept my head above the water and he never pressured me, letting me hold his mane or put my arm over his withers so he could pull me along. We never left the shallows; I could always let go and be standing. And my skin never stuck to his. It was magical.

When I finally left the water, I left my shorts on and walked

around the beach to dry them off. He stayed in the water, watching me. I wanted to ask him why he let me swim with him, why he was so gentle with me, why he wanted me to trust him, but whenever the question tried to come out, I felt I already knew the answer. Looking at him, seeing his powerful muscles move under his ethereally glowing coat as he paced parallel to me, his eyes always on me, every part of him and every part of me attuned to each other, I knew.

It took me nearly another two hours to leave him. As I put my shirt and shoes back on, I promised him I'd see him again tonight. Walking back up the beach and into the woods, I looked over my shoulder. He was still there, standing still and elegant, watching me. I smiled, and he smiled back.

Chapter Seventeen (Ava)

On Wednesday, Jason brought us out to the clearing after we ate while Shebal and Abigail were inside washing up.

"Today, as promised, I'll be showing you how to build a chair." He stood over a pile of wood cut into different shapes, a small pile of hammers, and three boxes of nails. "First I'll build one to show you how it's done. Then you, split into your cabins, will make two chairs between you. I'll take them up to Gus's to sand them and varnish them when we're all finished. And I'll be here to answer any questions, of course."

He took a hammer and a box of nails, then started pulling pieces of wood off the pile. I had no idea what he was doing, or how he knew what to do without a manual, but he quickly turned the random wooden shapes into a nice, sturdy dining chair.

"Well! There you have it. Pretty simple stuff," he said, wiping sweat from his forehead as he stood back and admired his work. "Any questions, or are we ready to get started?"

I didn't know where to begin with questions, but Genette and Henry were ready, so we went and got our supplies. Ripley hadn't been able to follow either, so we sat back, handing nails and pieces of wood to my brother and Genette. They were actually able to work together, focused on the task at hand and

barely talking aside from directions and requests.

Since I had so much free time, I decided to check up on my sister's group. They, too, were working well. Hafsa was guiding Sid and Gwen, and though Jason was helping them pretty often, they were getting it done very efficiently. Hafsa really knew what she was doing, and Gwen was catching on quite fast. Sid was more in my role, but he was having as much fun as his friends. At one point, Gwen even tripped on a piece of wood left on the ground, but she only cried a little bit as she got up and shook herself off. I was so proud of her, my heart swelled.

It took us about two hours, but we successfully made the three chairs. Jason congratulated us all. We relaxed in the shade as he left to sand and varnish them. Abigail brought out her special lemonade. When he returned, Jason told us he would bring the chairs to our cabins when they were ready to be used.

As we were eating another round of fish tacos and fresh salad for lunch, Ripley and Gwen were talking about what we should do next.

"It would be nice if we had some time to relax again," Gwen said, glancing out the window. "I'm tired after this morning."

Ripley hummed. "Honestly I'd like to play a game. We haven't played many games yet."

"What sort of game?" Hafsa asked, since Gwen was still staring out the window.

"I don't know…" He picked at his salad, deep in thought.

"What if we made one up?" I suggested, feeling adventurous.

His face lit up. "Yeah? What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure really," I said, feeling suddenly nervous. I shrank down a bit. "I like capture the flag…"

"I liked the archery," Sid added. "Maybe we could combine them somehow?"

"Safely," I said, "but that sounds cool. Do you have any specific ideas?"

His cheeks flushed and he shook his head. We all seemed too anxious to share.

Genette put her elbows on the table and said confidently, "We could make a set of targets and color code them somehow, maybe sticking with the red and green from the ball game, and we could shoot the targets for points."

Ripley nodded excitedly. "I also liked the knot tying, could we incorporate that somehow?"

Everyone thought for a few moments, then I said, "We could maybe like, tie some rope to each of the arrows so we could pull them back?"

"That would help us not lose any arrows too," Hafsa said.

Ripley looked at Henry, who had just been quietly eating for once. "Would you help with that?"

"What? Uh, sure." He went back to his food.

Ripley grinned, not letting that ruin his fun. "Great! Thanks, Henry."

"Yeah," he said, sighing. "You'd need to make the targets out of something soft and light enough to pull back down, depending on where you put them."

"I was thinking in the trees and maybe on the roof of one of the buildings," Genette said, a little surprised. "That kind of thing."

"Yeah, they'd need to be light then."

"We could use pool noodles," I said. "Rip them into chunks about this big." I demonstrated with my hands.

Everyone nodded, even Gwen, who had turned back to the discussion when Henry spoke.

"Problem is that's just a shooting game. You wanted a capture

the flag thing," Henry said with a dismissive shrug.

"What if we got some buckets or something to use as, like, a net," Sid piped up, "and each team had to get as many of the pool noodle chunks into the other team's bucket as possible? We wouldn't need to color code them then too."

Everyone nodded again, but Henry just sort of shrugged again, not wanting to participate anymore. I felt really bad for him, but I couldn't risk talking to him in front of everyone. He'd definitely lash out at me.

"I'll go tell the counselors," Ripley said, getting up. "Who else wants to come?"

Hafsa stood up and so did Sid, then Gwen followed. She probably didn't want to feel left out. Sid waited for her to catch up. My little sister was always running along after a group of friends; I was glad these three were good for her.

They brought the counselors back to us. Shebal looked at us seriously, and Jason had his arms crossed.

"Are you guys really ready to play with bows and arrows?" Shebal asked.

"Shebal—" Hafsa started.

"No, Hafsa, you could get seriously hurt playing with weapons," he said firmly. "I need to make sure you all know how to use them well enough for us to let this game happen."

Jason nodded. "Not all of you know how to shoot yet. I remember there was some struggle, and even though you all eventually got the hang of it, one day of practice isn't good enough."

Henry frowned. "What if there were only two of us shooting?"

Shebal raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"I know how to shoot an arrow very well. So does Ava. We could be the shooters."

"One on each side," Ripley said, nodding vigorously. "The rest of us could, could…"

"Grab the pool noodles," Sid stepped in, "and bring them back to the buckets."

"And others will guard the buckets!" Hafsa said triumphantly.

Shebal had a broad smile on his face. He turned to Jason, who gave him a nod, then he told us we could go ahead with the plan.

"But we'll be watching you," Jason said with a proud smile, "to make sure nobody gets hurt."

"I'll help you cut up the noodles," Abigail said, following us as we all rushed outside.

The younger kids all ran to the storage building with Shebal. Genette and Abigail followed them a little bit behind. Jason went up to his cabin. I hung back, drifting over to Henry, who was leaning on the wall of the dining hall.

"Thanks for your input back there," I said, trying not to be awkward.

He shoved his toe into the dirt, making a deep gouge. "It's whatever."

I put my hands in my pockets and kicked a rock around. "You really made Ripley and Hafsa happy."

His face was getting red so I decided to stop talking. We stood in very awkward silence for a long time before he quietly said he didn't get why I changed my hair.

Was that a trap? I felt like it was a trap. "I… I needed the change, the, uh, autonomy."

He put his mouth into a tight line. "I know you bleached it because Sid said you looked like me."

I felt my heart skip a beat. My whole body was trembling ever so faintly. He sighed angrily and stalked away.

Jason came up behind me and nearly scared me out of my skin when he asked what was up.

"Oh! Nothing," I said, laughing.

His face softened. "Ava, I'm not going to press, but I am here if you need me. And I won't interfere unless I feel that your safety or someone else's safety is at risk," he said, then added in a lighter tone. "I know how uncomfortable it is to have to sit and talk about your feelings to someone you don't really get along with."

I gave him a tense smile and thanked him. Then I excused myself to get my bow after seeing Henry walk off with his.

Genette was already climbing trees to set up the targets, and Sid and Hafsa set the goals. One was by the fire pit, and the other was between the bridge and the dock.

"We need teams," Hafsa said, "and they have to be different than the ball game because Ava and Henry have to be on different sides."

"I wanna be with Ava," Sid said.

"I think everyone does," I heard Hafsa mumble as I walked into the storage building. "I'll go with Henry then."

Shebal squinted at me to adjust his eyes as I walked through the bright doorway. "Here for your bow and quiver?"

I nodded.

He gave it a final inspection before handing it off to me. "Now make sure you don't shoot any people," he said, but under the seriousness there was an amused and proud warmth in his voice. "I'd be catching the shit for that."

I laughed, much easier this time. "I'll be careful, Shebal."

I walked out, looking around at the clearing. Hafsa had gone to sit with Henry at the fire pit. Ripley had joined them too and was watching Henry tie his arrow up. Genette was up another

tree with Sid and Gwen spotting her.

"Are you two on my team too?" I yelled as I approached.

Gwen nodded, but she did still seem distracted. As Genette shifted to give me a thumbs up, a couple of twigs broke off and fell, right in line with Gwen.

"Watch out, Gwen!" Sid cried.

Gwen sidestepped right in time. "Oh!"

"Sorry," Genette called down, worried.

"Everyone's okay," I said, hurrying the last few feet. Gwen was staring back out into the woods. I cleared my throat. "Um, we're four people and Henry's team is just three."

Sid shook his head. "Abigail is on his team too."

Henry called me over to tie my arrow, and he showed me how to tie the end of the rope to the bow for when I was ready to fire, since we decided that it would be more fun if the first shot wasn't already tied. I said as little as possible, but he was genuinely being helpful again.

Once Genette and Hafsa had set up all the targets, and my team had been assigned the goal by the fire pit, we started the game. Henry immediately aimed for the pool noodle in the big tree nearby; he was running up the slope towards it. I leaped over the logs and leaped again, finding more energy than I thought I had, until I got in range of the tree. I dropped to one knee. Henry had me in his sights as we both raced to tie an arrow to the bow. He was faster and he got the target. Hafsa bolted up and grabbed it from him.

"Go, go, go!" he encouraged her as she bolted past me, so fast I could feel it.

"Do I chase her?" I asked, my heart pumping.

"No!" Sid called from behind me. "I do!"

Hafsa squealed and I turned in time to watch her jumping and

twisting, trying to get away from him. He was faster, though, and managed to grab the noodle.

"You're slacking, Ava," I heard Henry yell.

I whipped back around to see him already holding a second pool noodle, one of two on the roof of the storage building.

"But I have the upper hand!" I sprang into action, running up to the building and shooting my ready arrow.

Henry laughed triumphantly. I had missed. My arrow clattered back towards me.

"Don't you think you've won," I said, nocking it again. "Genette!"

She was there in a flash, thinking ahead of me. She dropped into a skid as she approached Henry, who had left the second noodle on the ground. She hooked it with her foot, kicking it into the air. I held my breath as he shouted and reached for it, but her hand was in the air already. She caught it! She whooped in glee, rolling out of the way as he swiped at her.

"Give that back!"

She tore off down the slope. I could only hope she got past Abigail. Now I had to get this noodle. I fired. It hit! I yanked it down and ran after Genette, ripping the piece of foam free and throwing it. I was trying to get it into the bucket, but it hit the side of the dock and fell into the water.

Henry came up behind me, panting, holding yet another noodle. "Damn. I'm not going after that."

I grinned at him mischievously. "What if I chased you in?"

He whapped me on the head with the noodle; luckily he'd taken it off the arrow first. I dropped my bow and pushed him. He laughed, he actually laughed, and pushed me back. We wrestled, forgetting the game for a minute. I felt like it would have felt to play with my older brother as a little kid, carefree

and full of life.

He let go of me, still smiling, and gave my hair a final rough ruffle. "Race you to the next target," he said, and we were off.

At the end of the day, I hung out with Genette on the dock. It was a great end to a great day, even though I hadn't won the shooting game. Everything that had happened over the last two days was off my mind and off my shoulders. It was just me, Genette, and lots of mosquitoes.

"Isn't it nice when it gets dark out here?" I said, looking out into the woods on the far shore. The sky was inky blue behind the tops of the trees, which looked like black brushstrokes. Everything was consumed in the darkness.

"Yeah," Genette replied, but she was looking at me.

I glanced over and stuck my tongue out, bumping her shoulder affectionately with my fist.

"What?" she snorted, grinning.

"I'm talking about the lake and the forest," I retorted, "not me."

"The lake and the forest aren't the only things that look nice."

I blushed to the roots of my hair and looked back out at the woods, but I could tell she was still looking at me.

"Your new hair does really look good," she said softly. "It suits you very well, being short, and the color brings out your eyes."

I felt a stab of something negative but tried to push it away; Genette had no way of knowing that I hated the color of my eyes. I didn't need to go run off again to change more about myself. Instead, I quietly told her my eyes were ugly.

"What? No, they're not, Ava. They're beautiful."

"They're just brown… Like dirt or—"

"No they're not. Yes they're brown, but that doesn't make them ugly. They're warm and welcoming, and when you're

worked up or passionate about something they glow. They show how wise you are, how much you've survived, how much you think. They show when you tease me that you mean you like me. They show when you're hurting and when you're overwhelmed. They're more than what you see in them." She scooted closer and asked to put her hand on my shoulder.

I nodded, finding it hard to speak or even swallow.

"Your eyes are yours, and that's why they're beautiful," she whispered. "They're not like your brother's, or anyone else's."

My stomach did flips. She just read me like a book. I asked her, "How do you know that's what I'm worried about? Looking like Henry?"

"You did run away after Sid compared you to him."

I tucked my legs up to my chest. "I guess I did."

"It's okay, it makes sense." She looked out at the lake and sighed softly. "I wouldn't want to look like my dad either."

I put my hand over hers, feeling her skin, which was as rough as mine from use. I chose my words carefully. "What was he like?"

"I don't know," she said bluntly. "He was always away. Working. He was a traveling salesman. He worked for some big company, got my mom a job at a pretty nice golf course, but she was a maintenance worker. She's Jewish, that's why. They only care about you if you're white. The kids at school, too, they were terrible to Sid and me." She moved her hand so her fingers were laced with mine. "It's better here, a bit. I wish things were different, still."

"I'm sorry," I said. I wasn't sure what else to say. "I don't think anything different of you at all."

She glanced over at me, a glimmer in her eye. "Oh, at all? I hoped you'd at least think of me a little different…"

I laughed nervously, a little too loud, a little too short. "What do you mean?"

She squeezed my hand a bit and I became very aware of how she was touching me. I waited a long time for her to respond, but she never did. She just held my hand and we watched the stars grow more brilliant in the black sky above the lake, reflected down in the slow waves like a million little city lights lost under the water. I remembered sitting up at night, peeking out the window in our shared bedroom of the stuffy little apartment, watching all the other people in their tiny, lit-up windows, wondering what it felt like in their homes, next door yet far away from mine.

"What are you thinking about?" Genette asked eventually.

"Running away," I said, and swatted a bug away from my ear.

"From here?"

"No, like… If I wasn't adopted by Alan and Aileen. I never thought about it then just because I didn't think it could work, but I guess I always wanted to. I would look in people's windows and think about living a different life with my siblings and we'd all love each other and be loved."

She listened thoughtfully. "I would take long walks when I could, get a little lost. I would hope someone would come looking for me so they'd appreciate me more when they found me. Or that nobody would ever look and I could just disappear. But I loved Sid too much for that, so I'd always come home. Even if my mom was strict and overbearing, I loved her, too, and I knew she needed my help."

"Why did you leave?" I asked, chancing a question I had tried to ask her before.

She froze for a moment. Her face slowly became drawn and painful, making her look very, very small. I wanted to hold her

close, and from some stroke of confidence and fearlessness, I let go of her hand, gently reaching out. I put my arm around her shoulders. She leaned into me. It was a while before she spoke, but eventually, she did.

"When I was ten, my dad came home. He had been gone a long time. Things were okay at first… He always brought us gifts when he came back, but this time he didn't. He didn't have the money, he said. But he always had the money. Mom wasn't the same after that. I remember watching her snoop through his things and then they fought… Really fought. And then there were lawyers, and court, and phone calls, and she just stopped talking to us. Dad left again as soon as he could. He didn't say goodbye. Sid's family got custody because his grandmother had given my parents custody of him, back when they all thought my family would do better." She wrenched a piece of wood out of the dock and tossed it in the water. "That was that."

I pulled her closer. "I'm so sorry, Genette."

She shook her head. "It's okay," she said, quickly wiping a tear away. "It was a long time ago."

"It can still hurt."

"It doesn't have to… Not right now. I want this to be a good time."

I didn't want to say the wrong thing, so I said nothing.

"What do you want your life to look like in ten, fifteen years?" she blurted. "Like, will you want kids? I think I would. I want to do right by a child."

I shrugged. "I don't even know what I'll do after high school. But I think having a kid would be nice, if I could handle it. I don't think I'd make a good mother. I wasn't really… Shown how."

She nodded. "It would be a challenge… But I'm getting ahead

of myself. I wouldn't want to be a single parent but I've always had trouble with relationships."

"Oh me too," I laughed. "Boys don't like me much."

"Do you like them?"

I tensed up. "Sure," I said, but it wasn't what I meant.

"Ava, this is me you're talking to. I'm not going to judge you."

I couldn't get my mouth open.

"I won't tell anyone, either. I promise."

"What? I haven't said anything," I said without thinking.

She put her hand on mine, which was still on her shoulder, holding her against me. "I like girls, Ava. I'm a lesbian."

I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding for so many years. "Me too," I whispered, a great weight coming off me. I finally had the permission to do this, to be this. To be me. "I'm a lesbian too."

"I'm glad I met you," she said in a rush, putting her head on my shoulder.

"I'm glad I met you too."

"You're one of the best people I know."

Overwhelmed, I said, "You too."

She swallowed, shifting. "I voted to leave, back when… I wanted to go home. But I'm glad I didn't. I'm so happy I still have the chance to get to know you."

I didn't know why I was tearing up, but then again, I guess I did. "I suppose we're both lucky I outvoted you."

She laughed and hugged me. I loved her laugh. I didn't want to think of not getting to hear it again. She told me we should probably get back inside before anyone notices we'd been out so late. She held my hand the whole way home.

Chapter Eighteen (Sid)

The midafternoon sun was hot on my skin as we trudged through the swamp again. Gwen was leading us on another expedition, but Hafsa was here this time too. We navigated the damp landscape with some serious discomfort; all the stagnant water was a great place for mosquitoes to spawn, so we were being eaten alive even with ample bug spray. Gwen was still looking for something, but this time she was much more anxious. The longer we walked, the more frantic she got.

"What are you looking for?" Hafsa called her out, fanning herself. She looked like she was boiling in her jeans and long sleeved shirt.

"Nothing!" she squeaked, slapping a bug on her shoulder.

"Do you think we're dumb? You're obviously looking for something. Nobody wanders around in a swamp full of mosquitoes for fun."

"Maybe I do," she retorted. She swatted a fly away from her ear.

"I don't think so."

"You're wrong!"

Hafsa stopped. "I'm going back then." She crossed her arms. "Are you coming, Ripley? Sid?"

I frowned, looking between the two girls. Ripley itched his

arms.

"See, they're staying with me," Gwen snorted, turning to carry on.

"Um, well," Ripley spoke up, "I'm kinda getting eaten alive…"

"Me too," I said, itching my scalp. I hated when they bit me there.

Hafsa lifted her head proudly.

Gwen, slapping her cheek and leaving a dark red spot, looked like she was going to cry. "I don't want to do this alone, guys…"

"Do what?" Hafsa jeered.

She flinched. "I… I…"

"Admit it, Gwen, you're cornered."

She shakily took a breath, yanking her hair. "Fine! Fine. I'm looking for something."

"What, then?"

Her lip trembled. She smacked her thigh and let out an overwhelmed little whimper.

"The faster you tell us, the faster we can get away from these bugs," I said, frustrated.

Gwen made a fist in her hair. "A kelpie. A baby kelpie. I saw him the other night, when I went to get tea."

"You saw a baby kelpie?" Hafsa and Ripley asked in unison.

"Maybe! I maybe saw a baby kelpie," Gwen clarified.

Hafsa furrowed her eyebrows. "What do you mean? What did you see?"

Gwen took a deep breath. "I went out to get tea, but the door to the dining hall was locked so I went to get a counselor and Abigail—"

"We know, you told us that before," I interrupted.

She nodded. "After I got the tea I was coming back, and I looked out to the shore on the other side of the counselor's

cabins, and through the wild growth there I thought I saw this little horse silhouette walking this way."

Ripley interrupted her now, saying, "Is that why you asked me about if kelpies have foals or lay eggs?"

She nodded again. "And why I asked where they lived. If they live in swamps," she paused to swat a bug, "I figured the baby would come this way."

"Why would you follow a baby of a dangerous wild animal?" Hafsa said seriously. "That would only lead you to the mother."

She looked distraught. "I didn't follow it then. I'm only looking for it now. And last time we went here."

"Can we walk and talk?" I asked, getting unbearably itchy.

They unanimously agreed, so we hurried out of the swamp. Gwen went on to explain how the kelpie foal had been alone, and how she was worried that it was an orphan because it truly looked small and young, hardly old enough to be on its own. She teared up when she connected it back to the kelpie who had died, who had just foaled.

"Well," Ripley said, "I think you're in the right. Let's find this foal, make sure he's healthy, and try to relocate him. Maybe there's another kelpie in the area who will take him?"

"That'll be hard," Hafsa mentioned, "since they're not exactly domestic horses."

"But you can talk to them," I said. My face lit on fire when everyone gave me weird looks. "I mean, you must be able to. They're people too, right?"

Hafsa and Ripley nodded.

"So are they wild animals or are they people?" Gwen protested, exasperated.

Before Hafsa could argue, Ripley said, "What Sid and Hafsa mean by that is that kelpies are more likely to listen to you and

treat you like an equal if you talk to them."

"As long as they're not trying to kill you." Hafsa looked grim. "And I still don't know how likely it will be for a kelpie to understand we mean to help a foal, especially if it's sick, injured, or starving."

Gwen gasped. "It must be so hungry if it isn't weaned yet…"

"It most likely is weaned, or has had to wean itself," Ripley said.

"We're getting close to our cabins now," I said as they came into view.

We all paused and promised to keep looking for the kelpie and do what we can to make sure he's okay without interfering too much. Gwen's promise, however, was spoken with a trembling voice.

Dinner was fish. I was getting a bit tired of fish. Once we were finished eating, we all went to our cabins. Hafsa and I chatted about how we were looking forward to tomorrow's bonfire. I sat on the new chair and she sat on her bed. We stayed up very late, talking easily about our families, our schools, and our interests. She played the same games here that I did, and in the city, she watched some of the same shows. It felt so good to connect to someone my age without feeling like they were setting me up to be a joke for their friends. And it was especially nice to talk to her. I liked Hafsa a lot, more than I wanted to admit, even to myself.

Eventually, we had talked for so long we were getting ready to go to bed. She was unwrapping her hijab, so I looked away.

"It's fine," she said. "I don't mind if you see. It's more for the public, for controlling who can see me how."

I looked back at her and instantly felt myself blush. It wasn't even that she was prettier with her hair uncovered, it was that

she was so comfortable with me.

Gwen stepped out of the bathroom, looking uncomfortable and holding the bug spray. "I'm going out."

"Okay," I said. "Have fun."

When the door clicked shut, Hafsa asked where I thought she was going.

I yawned. "I don't know."

"Do you think she's looking around in the swamp again?"

"I don't know," I repeated. "I guess she might be."

She sighed. "I think it's pretty likely."

I yawned again and stood up, stretching. "I'm going to bed," I said.

She frowned a bit and said goodnight. I brushed my teeth and climbed up to bed, waiting until I heard her stop moving around. Was I going to risk it? I wanted to make sure he was okay, and ask him what he knows about the foal. I didn't understand how he knew; he was too young to be the father and I'm pretty sure kelpies don't live in herds like horses do. Maybe word just gets around in a small lake like this.

I rolled over, staring down at the room through the guard rail. Was I really going to risk it, though? Gwen could see me. Hafsa could be waiting up, too, for when Gwen returns. I sighed quietly, feeling deeply disappointed. I had been having a good time talking with Hafsa. It sucked that this kelpie had distracted me from that, and I can't even go see him.

Pulling the covers up, I rolled back over and tried to fall asleep.

Chapter Nineteen (Ava)

"Slow down, Gwen, I can't understand you," I said, rubbing my eyes blearily before spraying more bug spray around us. We were sitting out on the logs in the gray early morning, since she decided she had to wake me up now to tell me something vastly important.

"I'm sorry." She pulled at her hair, even though I'd touched the back of her hand twice now. "I snuck out last night. Well I didn't really sneak, Hafsa and Sid saw me leave, but I didn't tell them where I was going."

"Where were you going?" I prompted.

She chewed her lip. "Can I tell you the other things first?"

I nodded.

"I saw Shebal," she said, her eyes darting around. She looked over her shoulder at my cabin.

I tilted my head, unsure what to give her. "What are you looking for?"

"Is the door closed? Like closed tight?"

I nodded again. "Why?"

"I saw Henry too."

I felt cold to my core, suddenly quite awake. "Doing what?" I asked, my mouth dry.

She shook her head. "He was just sneaking around, but…"

"I know." I swallowed uncomfortably. "His boots were dirty, too… Muddy."

She hugged her arms. "I don't like this."

"Me neither."

We were silent for a long while. The sun rose, growing redder and redder above the trees, turning the gray sky blue. The lake caught fire in the dawn light. Blues, whites, and golds rolled on the gentle waves. It was beautiful, but I could hardly look at it. I stared at my feet, trying to stay grounded.

"Sorry for waking you up so early."

I shrugged.

A door creaked open and I looked up to see Genette walking out of our cabin, still in her pajamas. She hurried over and asked what was up. I stood up, stretching and yawning around explaining that Gwen had a bad dream. Genette smiled warmly and covered her mouth as she yawned, then told me she'd be back out in a second. As she reentered the cabin, I asked Gwen again what she had been doing out last night.

Her face turned red and she chewed her lip.

I raised an eyebrow. "Spit it out, sis. I'm not gonna get mad at you, whatever it is."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She took a deep breath. "I've been sneaking out for the past few days because when I went out one night to get tea because I couldn't sleep, Abigail made tea for me but on the way back to bed I thought I saw something in the woods towards the shore that doesn't have the dock," she took another breath, looking more worried. When she spoke, she was a lot quieter. "It was… I think it was a baby kelpie. So I've been looking for him for a few days and," her voice got even softer, "I found him last night."

Before I could properly react, Genette was back out. Hafsa, too, stepped outside. The counselors came out and laughed when they saw we were already awake. Abigail went to wake up the rest of the campers while Shebal and Jason went off to cook breakfast. They let us sit inside. Gwen decided to tell Genette a version of what happened last night: that she saw Henry and Shebal sneaking into the woods when she stepped out to get some fresh air right before bed.

Genette looked grim. "I know it's Henry. I just don't know why Shebal's sneaking around too," she whispered.

Gwen frowned but didn't comment.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair and feeling how different it was. "I have been making excuses for him, I guess."

Genette touched my arm sympathetically.

"There's no hiding from it now."

"Hiding from what?" Sid asked as he came up behind me with Hafsa and Ripley.

I jumped. "Nothing," I said instinctively.

Gwen pulled her lips into a tight, awkward smile. "It's okay, Sid, she's just anxious," she said, and explained what happened.

As I listened to them all talking about it, I watched my brother through the window. He was by the dock, pulling something out from the water. My heart was beating so hard my vision blurred. I forced myself to look away and do breathing exercises to calm down, but it wasn't working. I nearly leaped out of my skin when Genette nudged me to tell me breakfast was ready.

Henry walked in. My heart could have stopped. He walked up to the service window and got food before the rest of us.

I swallowed and my spit tasted like blood. I had to stop making excuses sometime.

Later, the weather was too sticky for us to do much, so we

were left with free time. Gwen came over after Genette and I had finished watching a short series of horror videos on her computer. She asked if Genette and I wanted to come see something Ripley had been showing them at her cabin.

"Sure," I said, and Genette agreed as well. I risked a glance at Henry's bed as we left, but his curtain remained closed.

When we got to her cabin, Ripley, Hafsa, and Sid were waiting patiently, sitting on the edge of Hafsa's bed. Genette took a seat on the chair as my sister sat on her bed. She patted it, so I sat beside her.

"What's up?" I looked over at Ripley.

He cocked his head in confusion.

Gwen nervously said, "That was kind of a lie, sorry. Ripley isn't showing you anything… I'm telling you something."

I gave her a serious stare. "Is this about…?"

She nodded, then recapped what she'd told me. "I found him last night," she said to wrap it up.

I watched Genette's reactions. She seemed overwhelmed, but not badly; a lot had been covered, so I was secretly proud of her for staying calm, and a little envious. She was following. I longed to hold her hand to help her stay calm, or maybe to help me stay calm.

"I'm not sure if he's healthy or not," Gwen carried on. "I managed to lead him to a secluded place in the swamp, but he's very skinny and seems to have some trouble staying on his feet. I'm worried. I don't know what to do…"

Genette cleared her throat. "You should release him, Gwen. He's a wild animal, a kelpie at that. He could hurt you, or you could hurt him by making him too friendly with humans." She looked to Ripley for support. "Right?"

He frowned a bit. "Well…"

Hafsa stepped in. "Kelpies are more like catfolk and lakefellows than your snowspider, Genette."

I noticed Sid looking perplexed, but Gwen said that couldn't be right because the kelpie foal hadn't spoken to her, just growled and whistled.

Hafsa played with her hijab. "It's kind of complicated. There's a language barrier and a culture barrier. Everything, snowspiders and kelpies and all of us, can understand the common language, but it isn't necessarily the easiest or the first choice. And while there are communities in Silent Woods where everyone recognizes everyone as equally, like, sentient, which we all are, it's not the norm everywhere to, like, befriend an animal the same as Sid, Gwen, and Ripley are my friends. Does that make sense?"

We all, roughly, nodded.

Gwen asked, "What about hunting? Isn't that, like, murder?"

Hafsa laughed a little. "Uh, no, but I don't really know how to explain that exactly. You have to thank anything you kill for its life, even plants, and you can't kill without reason, just to eat or in self defense or something. But again I've only lived here so I don't know very much."

Ripley looked up from his notes to thank her, and she awkwardly smiled.

"Gwen," I asked, "how bad is the standing problem? I've heard that's a sign of prematurity in foals."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Premature foals have a high mortality rate."

She started crying. "I.. I don't know, he just stumbled a lot and lost his balance…"

"It's okay, Gwen. We'll figure something out. We know you don't mean any harm."

She nodded furiously. "I just want him to be okay."

Ripley smiled. "Then he will be."

Hafsa and Sid nodded, and Genette told her she'd do anything she could to help. I passed Gwen a tissue from her nightstand.

She blew her nose. "Thanks guys."

Genette swept some of her hair behind her ear. "That leaves me with one question."

We looked up at her.

"Why was Shebal sneaking around too?"

Hafsa's face darkened and she sighed angrily. "That's his business. Henry was obviously the one who set the traps. Ripley and Gwen confirmed that the first trap was his, and he's been acting suspicious this whole time. He even brought traps to camp and showed Ripley! The only thing you have against my brother is that he's preoccupied."

"And sneaking around at night," Gwen quietly added.

Hafsa glared at her. "That's his business!"

"Hey, nobody's trying to say your brother has done anything wrong," Genette said calmly. "I'm only wondering what he's up to. And yes, that is his business, not ours."

Hafsa crossed her arms and said, "Thank you."

Uncomfortable with the atmosphere, I suggested that Ripley and Sid go check on the baby kelpie with Gwen. I asked Hafsa if she wanted to get some ice cream from the shop with me and Genette. We split up pretty fast, the tension unwinding. Genette and I chatted with Hafsa as we walked; I wanted to know what life was like back in the city, since it had been so long since I lived there. She and Genette shared stories of their wanderings in the woods, though Hafsa's were certainly more fantastical.

That evening, things were considerably cooler, so we busily

gathered firewood for the bonfire. Ripley, Gwen, Genette, and Sid went out foraging with Shebal, so Henry, Hafsa, and I stacked kindling in the fire pit.

"This is my second favorite part of making a fire," Hafsa said. "My first is adding stuff to the fire and seeing it getting eaten up."

"I like chopping firewood," Henry said, "and squirting kerosene on the fire."

I snorted a laugh. "Yeah, you've nearly burned your eyebrows off doing that."

"I'll burn yours off if you're not careful," he shot back, his playful tone edged.

Abigail came out, so I didn't have to respond. She praised our work and asked if we knew where Shebal had taken the others.

"I think they're on this side of the island," Hafsa said, pointing towards the bridge.

"Thanks," she said as she walked back into the dining hall, "and you guys are free to come in for a little snack. You've earned it."

We headed inside and got some cookies and lemonade, then sat together and chatted. It was mostly me talking to Hafsa; Henry's brief pleasantness had faded again. I didn't know what was going on with him. He kept swinging from being playfully rude to me like always to snapping, going silent, and generally being an ass. I guess I did know what was up, but… I don't know. If only we could talk…

When the bonfire was finally ready, we shared hotdogs, marshmallows, and freshly picked berries while Jason and Ripley had a storytelling competition. They both assured us their tales were true, and honestly, I believed them. Why wouldn't I?

As the dusk was turning to twilight, we were settling down and getting ready to go to bed. As he collected the marshmallow bags, Shebal cleared his throat and asked for our attention. We all stopped and looked up at him.

"Everyone," he said with a bright, wide smile, "I'm proud to announce that my husband and I have had a baby."

"Oh!" Gwen said, her face lighting up. "That's lovely, Shebal."

He blushed and clasped his hands together. "Thank you, Gwen. It is truly lovely."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" she asked.

"Lakefellows don't use the same gender binary," he explained. "Bryllig is our daughter, but that's just because my husband thinks that word is sweet. We won't be using pronouns for Bryllig until predisposition to a social role is shown."

She looked confused. "How do you talk about, um, Bryllig?"

"Just like we have been," he said. "It's easier than you think, but it does take some practice."

I moved away from the conversation as he answered a few more of her questions. Genette followed me soon after as I walked back to the cabin; Henry was already inside. I brushed my teeth with Genette and we shared a knowing look.

This is why Shebal had been sneaking around so much. He'd been keeping tabs on his family. That was great, of course, and in retrospect we never should have doubted Hafsa, but… This means I can't cling to the shadow of a doubt.

Henry had been setting traps. And we had to do something about it.

Chapter Twenty (Sid)

After a long Saturday of playing tag in the woods, looking for cool rocks by the closest shores, watching some movies in the dining hall, and learning about bugs, we retired to our cabins in the warm evening. It had been a great day, and I was chatting with Hafsa as we got ready to go to sleep. It was really nice to get to talk to her and be close to her again. I wanted this to last; no interruptions, not even for the kelpie.

We talked for a while about how every year she's sadder that she misses Eid al-Adha and the new years celebrations while she spends her summers at Shimmering Lake, and what her human family does to make up for it when she gets back. I told her about Quviasukvik, the winter feast that brings good luck in the new year, and how I'd never celebrated it myself, but my uncle did before moving and that one year I was going to. This brought us to talking about the importance of food in our cultures.

"Do you ever cook at home?" she asked.

I nodded. "I help out a lot, but I'm not in charge."

"What do you make?"

"I'm really good at breakfast," I said, getting butterflies. "I like helping with omelettes, pancakes, French toast, homemade potato patties, that sort of thing."

"I'm the best at dinner," she boasted. "At least when I'm in Ottawa. I haven't tried cooking here."

"What's Catfolk food like?"

"Mostly venison and fish," she said. "Roasted cattails, berry soup, turtle stew, otter, mushrooms, and desserts made from tree sap. I know how to forage and I'm learning how to hunt better next year."

"That sounds really cool! What's otter taste like?"

She thought for a minute. "Gamy and fatty. It's not nearly as good as beef or fish."

"You didn't mention beef," I pointed out. "Was it your first time trying it when you came to Ottawa?"

She shook her head with a smile. "No, no, we go to the market in Kentsville. It's a town nearby. What I listed is just stuff we get from here, our traditional regional food. But we go to buy bread, beef, eggs, milk, that sort of thing."

"Oh, duh," I said with a snort.

She asked if I've ever had a tree sap cake.

I shook my head.

"I'll get you one," she said, her eyes twinkling. "You'll love them. They're sticky and kind of like a honeycomb. I'd tell you how to make them, but it's kind of a family secret."

"We could trade recipes," I offered slyly.

A grin slowly spread across her face as she tried not to say yes, but she burst into giggles and agreed. "I can't say no to you, Sid," she said.

I blushed to the roots of my hair and looked at my hands. "Well, uh, I'll get my uncle to write something down for you when I get home," I stuttered.

She covered her smile with the back of her hand, shifting so she was sitting with her legs in a different position. "Okay, I'll

run over after dinner tomorrow and ask my sister for a cake."

"That sounds good," I said, glancing up to meet her eyes. "Thanks."

There was a knock at the door. I groaned out loud.

"I'll get it," Gwen said, putting her book down and scooting to the end of her bed. She opened the door. "Oh! Ava, what's wrong?"

Ava hurried inside, wiping tears from her cheeks. She hugged an empty bag to her chest. "I saw him with a trap," she blurted between stifled sobs.

Gwen shook. "Henry?"

She nodded. "He was leaving the cabin with it. He went into the woods."

"When?" Hafsa asked briskly, poised to spring into action.

"Right before I came over."

Gwen slapped a hand over her mouth, barely muffling a sob. She scrambled to her feet. "I have to go! Red's in danger!"

I stood up with Hafsa. "Red?"

She didn't respond, shoving her feet into her sneakers and bolting out the door. It slammed shut behind her, pulled closed by the wind.

"Red must be that foal she found," Hafsa said, springing into action. "Everyone get your phones and let's go. We need to get them both out of danger and fast. Ava, show us where Henry was going."

She wiped her face hurriedly, breathing out a sob as she got up and led us out the door. We went around behind the cabins and into the woods. Instantly it got darker as the setting sun was obscured by the thickening trees. Ava ran deep into the woods with Hafsa right at her heels; far away, I could hear a faint and horrible sound.

"Guys," I yelled, scrambling to a stop.

Hafsa whirled around, grabbing a tree branch for support.

"I need to check the beach," I said.

"Good idea Sid!"

"Go with him," Ava urged, putting a hand on her shoulder. She swallowed hard. "I'm the best at comforting my sister. If I find her and I'm alone it'll be easier to get her back to her senses."

Hafsa nodded once and followed me as I tore ahead. I didn't want her to come with me, not if the white kelpie was calling for me. What if he was in danger? What if the trap Henry had set had…

No. I couldn't think it. I had to keep running.

Branches whipped me, yanking my t shirt and leaving long, white scratches on my arms. Hafsa, far behind me, told me to slow down, to wait for her. I couldn't. It was like my feet weren't even touching the ground. I noticed the big rock to my right as I skirted the clearing, nearly colliding with a huge bramble as I found the usual path.

"Sid?" Hafsa called. "Where did you go?"

As much as I wanted to turn around and tell her I was fine, I didn't know how to. Then my feet fell heavily into grassy sand and crunched on shells. I doubled over, heaving for air, watching the waves roll up onto the shore.

It was empty.

Where was he?

My eyes focused on a dark spot in the water, right near the shore. I took a few steps forward as I caught my breath. Bubbles rose to the surface in the middle of the dark shape. It moved further into the water, and for some reason I couldn't explain, I felt drawn to it. Soon I was up to my ankles in the cool water.

The shape moved, fluxed, and came into focus: long, black, swirling hair, framing a beautiful, moonlike face, her dark eyes looking up at me, full of love and life…

"Hello baby," she whispered, her voice bouncing around my head. "Come see me. Come, let me touch your face. My little baby, how you've grown."

I stiffened. The wind curled along the beach, whining in my ear. My mouth went dry, my throat squeezed, the words caught deep in my chest.

"You're not…"

She pursed her lips, pleading with me. "Not? Who else would I be?"

It can't be. She can't be.

"Of course I can," her voice wavered in the water, ripples pouring out around her as she rushed to meet me, a smile spread wide across her face.

I leaned into her, kneeling, reaching down to run my hand through her midnight blanket of hair, against all better judgment…

"Nobody will separate us again."

I barely had the space to think; what did she mean, nobody?

She broke the surface. Her brown face twisted and melded, muscle and bone, into something long, something full of teeth. The howl ripped through me before her jaws closed around my arm; she tore me right open. The massive shape of her body, a powerful mare, rose out of the lake and took me into the air. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't even think of what to do. She had me, and my arm was gushing blood, and my heart was shattered. We arced in the air for a moment before she dropped, diving headfirst back into the lake. Her slick mane fell around us, a curtain, choking me. And she was still beautiful.

Hafsa's scream was the last thing I heard before I went under.

Chapter Twenty One (Ava)

I pulled the drawstrings tight on my bag, the contents clinking and scraping. I winced at every sound. I had to get back, now. I had to get back before he did. Before he found me. With wild eyes, I scanned the immediate area for any shapes, any shadows that would tell me I was in danger. I only saw Gwen, hunched and shaking, tearing out her hair strand by strand. I reached over to touch her wrist, but she pulled away.

I stood up, pulling the bag onto my back. Motioning for her to get up too, I started to walk back towards camp. I paid attention to my feet, watching where they fell so I didn't step on any twigs. Gwen didn't take as much care, but she was doing her best. I knew that. My heart squeezed so painfully.

Suddenly, I heard Hafsa scream. Gwen and I both froze.

"That was close," she said.

We shared a look and took off.

It didn't take us long before we were on the small beach. Hafsa was shaking, standing far up the bank, her arms halfway reached out towards the water, which was still.

Too still.

"Where's Sid?" Gwen asked, her voice shrill.

"In the water!" Hafsa screamed.

"What?" I breathed.

It broke the surface. Waves crashed down around its massive brown body, slick black hair flowing around it as it twisted, Sid dangling from its mouth by his arm. I threw down my bag and ran forward but Hafsa exploded towards me, shoving me back.

"Don't!" she said, gripping my arm and not looking away from Sid. "That's a kelpie. It'll kill you."

"It's killing him," I snapped, trying to wrench my arm away, but she was strong.

"I know," she said, trying to sound mad but her voice broke and she sobbed.

The creature pulled up from the water again.

"Where the hell are the guards?" I said.

"What's it doing?" Gwen asked, pressing herself to my side.

Hafsa tried to speak but she just sobbed again. I pulled my arm away and put it around her shoulders. A scream, something unlike anything I'd ever heard before, ripped through the air. She clung to me harder.

"I have to do something, Ava!" she cried, kicking the sand at my feet. "Something!"

I raised my hand, pointing. "There's something else in the water!"

"What?"

There was. A white one now, tearing up from the other side of the lake, rushing towards this creature. They collided and whirled into the air, wrestling snakes, moving like a river of muscle and teeth. I couldn't tell what was happening, but there was white, there was brown, and there was red, and Sid was flung about as they fought. Gwen grabbed my hand. I tried to hide that I was shaking, shaking so hard.

Clearly, I saw the white kelpie close its jaws around the brown kelpie. The brown kelpie opened its mouth, wailing, blood

trickling out, and Sid dropped below the surface.

Hafsa leaped forward and the lion dove into the water.

"Hafsa!" Gwen squeaked, but when she tried to step forward she jerked back to my side. "We can't just watch, Ava—"

"It's all we can do, Gwen," I said firmly, but I had to close my eyes as blood colored the murky water.

I heard something burst out of the water and gasp. When I opened my eyes, Hafsa was dragging Sid up the bank by the back of his shirt. He was drenched, his arm torn and bloody, but clawing at the sand. His face twisted as he spluttered and struggled for breath. Gwen ran to him, and I ran to the water, as close as I dared to get. I could see the white kelpie clearly, circling the beach, and in the distance the blood trail led to the dark shape of the retreating brown kelpie.

Hafsa collapsed, changed back, and put her arms around Sid. She sobbed into the space between his shoulders as he begged to see him.

"Who, Sid?" Gwen asked, crouched down beside him. "Who?"

"The white kelpie," he coughed, dragging his hands through the sand. Water streamed down his face. "My kelpie…"

I couldn't get his voice out of my head all night. Gwen had texted me in the early hours of the next morning, asking what I thought he meant. I didn't know how to answer.

At breakfast, we all felt the impact of what happened, even those who didn't know. We decided, well, Sid decided not to tell the adults. I didn't agree, but what could I do? It was clear to the four of us that we'd be sent home if they knew. And I guess we all had our reasons for wanting to stay that bad.

We cleaned Sid's wound in his cabin's bathroom only with the supplies we had. I didn't know if we did a good enough job.

Shebal told us last night he'd be going to stay on the other

island to keep a closer eye on his baby, and I overheard him asking Hafsa to come with him. She had gotten so upset, she nearly cried. Gwen and Ripley went to comfort her, which is when he found out, and naturally I told Genette. Henry didn't know and I kind of wanted to tell him, but he'd been acting much scarier for the past couple days, so I avoided him.

Sid had been weird last night, and this morning at breakfast too. He kept looking out the window and itching at his arm.

"Aren't you hot in that?" Jason asked him playfully.

He pulled the sleeves of his long sleeve shirt down over his hands. "No."

I couldn't put words to why, but he was making me so uncomfortable.

Later that day, between tree climbing lessons and lunch, I slipped away into my cabin. Genette and Ripley had gone to the kitchen to get food for Baby, and Henry was still climbing. He'd wanted to stay in the tree when the younger kids went to the cabin, so Jason stayed outside to keep an eye on him.

Crouching in front of my bed, I swept aside my blankets where they draped over the edge. Reaching under and fishing out my bag so I could open it and shake out the broken traps onto the floor, I was able to see what exactly was going on. My brother made these. My brother set these. My brother killed an animal with these. Not just any animal, a kelpie. A person.

This is real.

This is real, and this is my brother.

I leaned over to touch the sharp metal tooth of one of the disabled bear traps. The door swung open with a scream.

"What do you think you're doing?" said the shadow that fell across me, ten feet tall.

The door slammed shut. I scrambled to get to my feet but he

tossed me onto the bed like a broken toy. The bed groaned on impact. I was breathless, silent. He was on top of me, knees on either side of my hips, one hand on my chest. The other on my throat. My mouth filled with spit and I fixed my eyes on him. Begging.

He didn't let up. He crushed me. My head was pounding and I could feel my heart beating in my fingertips. Air left my nose in a desperate attempt to get some in me, and my eyes started to itch as things got blurry, cloudy, gray…

There was a bang and the room filled with light. I vaguely heard a voice I recognized before Henry was ripped off me and thrown to the ground. I raggedly gasped for breath and heaved myself into a sitting position. Genette stomped on his chest. He rolled to the side, wheezing, spitting blood. She punched him in the face. Ripley fumbled with the door to keep it shut.

"Stop," he stuttered, finding his voice, then yelled, "Stop!"

Genette froze mid-punch, spat in Henry's face, and stepped off him. She stomped her boot inches from his face as she walked away, rubbing her hand.

Ripley let out an exasperated groan, rocking on his feet. "What. Is. Going. On."

Genette whirled around and stomped at Henry, who was still laying on the ground. "He was choking Ava!"

"I know that," Ripley snapped, then shook his head and apologized. "This is… Too much. I'm getting Jason."

"No!" Henry and I both said.

Genette looked at me. Henry looked at me. Ripley made an anxious noise.

"It's fine," I croaked, then coughed.

Genette put herself between me and Henry as he tried to get up. He sank back down.

"We don't need Jason, we need the police," Genette said coolly. She put her hand gently on my shoulder and I noticed her knuckle was bleeding. I felt I should kiss it, which stunned me in a detached way. Such a soft thought in such violence.

"I'm not sitting here and taking this," Henry shouted suddenly, exploding to his feet. He moved to shove Genette but she wasn't where he thought she was and he missed. He sighed loudly through his teeth in frustration before yanking the door open and storming out. Ripley had to jump to the side to avoid being crushed against the wall.

The door slammed shut. Hot tears dripped onto my thighs.

Ripley took a deep, steadying breath and came over to check me out. He asked me some questions that I answered in a fog. He didn't know enough about medicine for this, he said, but Genette encouraged him by reminding him about the times he told us about having to use his first aid training in the woods.

"There's no wounds," he said with a nervous laugh. "I've never dealt with strangulation before."

"Hey," I wheezed lightheartedly. "I'm still alive, you know."

They both laughed, but Genette put her arms around me and squeezed me.

After a couple minutes of being anxiously peered at under his phone's flashlight, Ripley let me relax. He stepped out to check to see where Henry went, and even though Genette was a bit afraid for him, he didn't let her come. She didn't want to leave my side and he could tell. I didn't think my brother would hurt him. He didn't really hurt people, not aside from me and our sister.

He was back in a flash. "He's in the dining hall," he reported. "I can see him sitting at one of the tables."

Genette nodded firmly. Then they turned their attention to

the traps on the floor. I held back a sob in my bruised throat and told them everything.

"I'm sorry, Ripley," I concluded, openly crying now. "I doubted you when you said the trap, the first trap, was his."

"Don't apologize," he said, giving me his hand. "It makes sense. I was never upset. Well… I'm furious with him." He closed his eyes. "But it's going to be okay."

I held his hand tightly. "What do we do?"

We were all silent for several minutes. It was plain as day that none of us had the faintest idea.

Chapter Twenty Two (Sid)

Sunday evening we had free time. Everyone was outside, except for Ripley, who was doing his testosterone shot, and Henry, who was nowhere to be found. Ava and Genette had gone up to the cliff to talk. Hafsa and Gwen were play fighting with sticks. Occasionally Hafsa would glance over at me, worried. I didn't know how to get up from the log where I was seated, isolated, trying not to pay attention to the itching on my arm. Or the tight, painful feeling in my chest whenever the breeze brought the scent of murky, cool lake water into my lungs.

They had no idea.

I closed my eyes and felt the rush and beat of water around me: in my ears, in my hair, against my skin. I opened my eyes and saw Hafsa triumphantly whacking Gwen's stick out of her hands.

"Aw! No fair!" Gwen whined.

Hafsa whapped her across her arms. They laughed and squealed and chased each other. As I watched them go, I felt so disconnected from the scene, I barely knew I had ever wanted to join in. I barely knew it was weird to sit here and be consumed by my thoughts. By the feeling of those teeth in my arm.

I picked at the bandages through my sleeve. Maybe if I bled again…

"Hey Sid," Abigail's voice startled me as she came up beside me. "Is this seat taken?"

I shook my head.

"How are you feeling today?"

I shrugged.

"You must be warm in that," she pointed out. "It's nearly thirty degrees today."

"I'm okay."

"Do you want a freezie?"

I paused before saying no, but she went and got me one anyway.

At dinner, I found it very hard to eat. Anything that went in my mouth felt wrong somehow, and if I stopped focusing all my attention on it, my chest would squeeze like I was filling up with water again. Ava also had trouble eating. We brought our full plates up at the same time. I tried to ask what was wrong, but I couldn't. She caught me staring and hurried back to my sister, who didn't so much as look at me. That cut deep. I practically ran back to my cabin, shutting myself inside and pushing my fingers through my hair.

What was wrong with me? Wasn't I the victim of something horrible? Why was I the monster?

A long while passed before Gwen stepped inside. She seemed surprised that I was there, and started chattering in an attempt to hide her concern. I could see it clearly in her eyes. She told me about the games they'd been playing outside, and that Henry had spent all day in his cabin and that Ava wasn't looking so good. She concluded after a deep breath by asking if I wanted to go check on Red with her.

"Uh, sure," I said, getting up and awkwardly adjusting my shirt. "Is anyone else coming?"

"Ripley, if that's okay," she said, looking me over with a gentle expression.

I nodded and tried to ignore how that made me feel.

"Are you okay, Sid?"

I started to respond but she held her hand out to me. I hesitated before taking it. Her skin was soft and warm. For the first time ever, touching someone else made my heart fluttery. But…

"It's okay to not be okay," she said in a small voice. "Especially after what happened."

I frowned and pulled my hand away. She tucked hers against her chest and said sorry as she rushed out the door. I followed her.

Ripley met us outside and we went right into the woods. Gwen was leading with me just behind her and Ripley beside me. He kept wandering off the path a bit to look at plants, so Gwen was just talking to me. It was easy to talk to her, and she was very open. She told me about her family, how she's always wanted a big dog, and how when she's old enough she wants to get an apartment in the city and work at a pet store as a dog groomer. We talked about what languages we were learning or wanted to be learning, since she wanted to learn German and Spanish and I wanted to learn Inuktitut. She told me randomly that she was afraid of cows, too.

No matter how I tried, I kept returning to how I felt holding her hand. How I knew it was hard for her to touch anyone or be touched.

I pushed it away. I didn't want to think about that right now.

Not with the sound of the lake still pounding in my head.

"You know," Gwen's voice sounded a few feet ahead. I hurried to meet her. "This is gonna sound silly, but I think it's, I don't

know, unfair that you and Hafsa and even Ripley all have some direct connection to the Woods. Like, it's great and cool that you do, but I don't."

"Do you feel left out?" Ripley asked. "I could teach you more about stuff here, if you want."

"That would be great," she said with a smile. "But I don't know, I think it would be cool if I had something unique that was just about me, you know?"

He nodded with a bit of a frown and a sideways glance at me.

I looked at my feet.

"Sorry if that's weird or offensive…" Gwen said nervously.

"No, it's fine," I answered. She hadn't addressed me directly, but what else could she be talking about?

When we got to the clearing Red was hiding in, he scrambled to his feet and started purring and clicking at us. It made me feel weird to be so close to another kelpie. Gwen took off her bag, dropping it on the ground and unzipping it. She happily said hello to him as she took out some Tupperwares. Ripley, though, didn't seem too happy to see him.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well," he said, crossing his arms, "he just looks…"

We both watched the shaky colt sniff at the plastic containers as Gwen opened them all. She set them down on the grass for him, letting him examine the contents: stolen anchovies, salad scraps, and the bones from the time Jason cooked himself a steak. Red whistled, wheezed, and whined as he poked through the food. He delicately picked up one anchovy but dropped it immediately. He sank to his knees and clumsily lowered his back end to the ground too.

"Oh, Red," Gwen murmured, fluffing his forelock. He nuzzled her arm, but wasn't very enthusiastic.

Ripley and I shared a look, but I didn't know what to do about it. Neither did he, as he said nothing and we packed up after nearly an hour of trying to get the poor kelpie to eat.

There was a bit of time before bed when we got back. Abigail and Henry were talking in the dining hall. Outside, the rest of us had a brief talk as a group about whether or not it would be a good idea to climb on the cliff as an activity. I didn't really participate and it honestly felt like nobody noticed. Not even Hafsa, Gwen, or my sister. It hurt a lot.

I went to bed pretty much right after. I couldn't get to sleep, though. Every time I closed my eyes, it was him. The flash of white in the dark water. The growl that shook me. The force at which he slammed into the other kelpie. The way he pushed me into Hafsa's grasp. His brilliant blue eyes…

There was such an intense pull in my stomach, in my heart. His eyes. I was being lured to the lake, back to where I almost died.

I crept out of bed and out of the cabin. Strangely, though nobody was inside, nobody was outside either. Safely in the shadows, I saw they were all in the dining hall. Laughing, playing games together. My chest felt cold, then filled again with him. I turned and was gone.

I made it to the beach with bugs eating me alive. I stopped right at the edge; where the grass barely faded into sand, where I could stay in the safety of the trees.

He watched me. His blue eyes took in my body. He shifted his weight from hoof to hoof, but didn't approach me.

"What?" I struggled to say. "What do you want?"

His ears went up at my tone.

"You brought me out here, didn't you?" I went on, taking a half step forward. "Didn't you? What do you want?"

He stood his ground, but reached his neck forward, nickering softly.

"No." I said firmly, then my voice broke. "I don't know. I… We can't do this any longer."

He breathed slowly, his eyes searching, searching.

I couldn't let him find how much this hurt. Anxiously wiping my tears away, I told him, "Go. I can't see you again. Go away."

He sidestepped, swishing his tail. Raising his head, he whinnied plaintively.

"Don't make this any harder for me, okay? Just leave! Go!" I waved my arms, trying to scare him off like he was just another horse, just another animal.

His nostrils flared and he put his ears back, dancing on his toes. I could see his struggle too clearly.

My eyes blurred with tears and I forced down a sob. "Get out of here. Go away."

He turned halfway to the shore and pranced down the bank, agitated. I wanted nothing more than to run after him; I wanted it so bad I felt the sand under my feet and his soft, wet mane in my hands. I felt the water breaking against my smiling face, I felt the bubbles surrounding me as I was pulled under, I felt the other kelpie's sharp, tearing teeth in my arm.

His hooves splashed against the lapping waves. He moved slowly, looking over his shoulder, snorting softly, crying for me. I pressed my hands to my hips, the blood pumping through my body so hard it made the wound vibrate. I blinked, sending tears rolling down my face.

As he got up to his withers in the water, he paddled in a slow arc, his eyes on mine, blue and brown, pulling me close, pressing my face to his damp neck as he pulled me under.

"Stop!" I shouted, smacking my hands over my eyes and

sobbing. "I want to stop feeling this way!"

There was silence as I cried. It took me a long time to uncover my face, shaking in the dark mouth of the woods. When I did look out at the beach, out at the lake, I was alone. My kelpie, my white kelpie, was gone.

I shivered and turned my back on the water as I hurried home with leaden feet. It was the longest and hardest walk of the whole three weeks here. I barely felt the biting bugs and the stinging plants that I stumbled across on my way back to my cabin. But as I paused for a moment in the door, I heard it.

His haunting wail, curling into the night sky. Saying goodbye to me.

I clasped my hand over my mouth, my injured hand, steadying myself on the closed door. Taking panicked, trembling breaths, I tried so hard but couldn't force the images of him away.

"I'm sorry," I whispered into my fingers. "I'm sorry."

Chapter Twenty Three (Ava)

I could barely get breakfast down. It wasn't entirely that my throat still hurt. All around me, the other campers were very tense and quiet. Genette sat very close to me, even though Henry was at the far end of the table. Gwen wasn't sitting with Hafsa, Sid, or Ripley; those three were together. Sid looked terrible and kept almost falling asleep. Abigail was walking up and down the aisle, making a point to check on Sid. Jason, however, was absorbed in eating.

I stayed after breakfast to help Abigail and Jason with dishes. It hurt to talk, so I didn't join their conversation, aside from nodding when they asked if I'd be interested in doing a baking competition today.

"It's not as boiling hot as it has been," Abigail said, trying to brush hair out of her face with the back of her hand, "so the ovens won't be as miserable to use."

"We've got everything to make brownies," Jason said after checking the pantry. "How do you think we should make this a competition? Ava?"

I shrugged and focused on scrubbing a pan.

Abigail hummed thoughtfully as she dried her hands. "There's that show where you've got to make something with a weird secret ingredient…"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Better than my idea."

"What was it?"

"To not tell them what ingredients were what," he said with a grin.

Abigail laughed. "That could be disastrous. I like my idea better."

"Yeah, me too," Jason said, still smiling. "What about you, Ava?"

"Oh? Uh. Yeah."

Abigail gave me a concerned half smile, but I dismissed myself before they could ask me what was wrong.

When we were all called back into the dining hall, the adults had covered the two tables closest to the kitchen with all the stuff to make brownies: butter, white sugar, eggs, flour, salt, cocoa powder, vanilla extract, and baking powder. There were also mixing bowls, big wooden spoons, spatulas, and measuring cups and spoons.

"Alright everyone," Jason said, clasping his hands together and shifting from one foot to the other, "we have a baking competition planned for today. How exciting is that? There's a twist though. You'll each have a special ingredient you need to incorporate into the recipe without any guidance."

"Please be cinnamon," Genette whispered beside me.

"You'll get to come choose your ingredient from our pantry."

"Yes!" she whisper-shouted a little too loud.

Abigail smirked. "Excited about something, Genette?"

She blushed and laughed. "I just have a great idea."

"I'm excited to see it," she said, "since I'll be your competition."

Jason nodded. "As usual, Abigail will be joining you to balance out the numbers. So Ava, Genette, Henry, and Ripley will be together, and Abigail will be joining Hafsa, Gwen, and Sid."

We split up right away. Genette told Ripley to go preheat the oven and grease a pan while I was to find the written recipe and start portioning the ingredients.

"We've already done that step for you," Jason reassured her. "You wanna come see the pantry, though? Since you've got the great idea."

She said sure; Jason brought her into the kitchen.

"Wait! Wait for me!" Gwen said, hurrying to the door while tying her apron. "And don't we get hairnets?"

"They're on the table with your aprons, Gwen," Abigail called.

"Oh," she stopped and turned, "just a minute then."

I got Genette her apron and hairnet. She rolled her eyes at me but put them on as I did mine.

"I'm excited for what you have in store, too," I told her, a bit nervous.

She looked a little embarrassed, thanking me with an awkward smile.

I turned back to the table, glancing over at my sister's group to see if she was having trouble with her hairnet, as she'd been taking a while. She was just helping Sid tie his apron, though. I noticed Hafsa putting a hairnet over her hijab while she was trying not to laugh. I giggled to myself.

"What's so funny?" Ripley teased as he tried to get his hairnet to stay on tight with only a short mohawk to hold down.

"Look at Hafsa," I said, nodding to her.

We had a laugh about it and Genette came back, slamming down a little shaker of cinnamon.

"This is gonna make us win," she said proudly. "I came up with this recipe myself. Best brownies ever."

"It does seem like a great idea," Ripley said. "I think cinnamon can make any baked good better."

She nodded. "Let's get started."

Gwen ran by behind her, complaining that nobody waited for her.

"Did you want the cinnamon?" Genette asked.

"No! I just wanted you to wait."

I chuckled to myself. She's so dramatic, I love it.

"What's the first thing, Ripley?"

"Melt the butter."

Genette looked over at Henry, who had just been sulking against the wall. "Why don't you make yourself useful and melt this butter?"

As he made his way over, I froze up. All I heard was my heart pounding in my ears, all I felt was how sore my throat was, how hard it was to breathe, the itching in my lungs. My vision blurred as he reached around me to pick up the dish of butter. The kitchen door closing was the loudest thing in the world. Then sound returned.

"I got a lemon!" Gwen called to her team as she bustled across the room.

Sid and Hafsa laughed about her hairnet.

Ripley put the recipe down, murmuring the instructions to himself.

Genette asked if I was alright.

I blinked at her, taking in her concerned face. "Yeah," I mumbled, then swallowed with some difficulty. "Yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay," Genette said calmly. She reached across the table and put her hand on my shoulder. "If you need to take a break it's okay."

I wanted to say no, insist that I'm fine, but I needed air. I listlessly walked up to Jason and asked to step out for a breather.

"Of course," he said, walking me to the door. "What hap-

pened?"

"I'm just a bit overwhelmed is all," I explained quickly.

"Let me know if you need to go rest in your cabin, okay?"

I nodded as I stepped outside. I ran my fingers through my short hair, breathing slowly with my eyes closed. Waiting for my heart to steady, I thought about my talk with Genette yesterday. We had been up on the cliff, watching the water break against the stones below. She had told me more about her old house, and her current house; I had done the same. I'd talked about the good things, mostly, to start. But there wasn't much to say about my old life. She'd coaxed out a few bad things. How our father used to hurt us. How Henry got on his good side by ratting us out for taking food on nights we weren't allowed to eat. How he kept getting on his good side by hitting us too. How that didn't stop anything, only made it worse. How I was afraid for him. He hadn't grown out of it, only changed from fists to words, and he was the same with his friends. They all laughed it off, but so did Gwen and I when other people heard. And what if he was to get a girlfriend? What if he had kids?

She'd held me. She'd told me it wasn't on me to fix him, or even care. Sometimes it's better for us to close our eyes to it, she'd said.

But he's my brother. I didn't know how to let go.

The door opened beside me, startling me a bit. Ripley stood in the doorway, smiling, with a cup of sugar in his hand.

"Hey," I said, catching my breath.

"Hey." His eyes twinkled warmly. "Let's go win this competition."

I couldn't help but crack a smile. "Whoever said there was a winner and a loser?"

He giggled. "Genette did."

"Of course."

Back at the table, Genette had the melted butter in the mixing bowl and was cracking in the second egg. Henry was sitting at the edge of the table, not participating, and I noticed Jason taking note of that. On the other side of the room, Gwen and Sid were close to arguing about what to do with the lemon rind. She wanted to make a lemon glaze, but Sid was saying that was too much work and they didn't have the stuff to make it.

"You didn't even see the pantry," Gwen snapped.

Abigail stepped in. "Guys, there's no need to get upset. We have icing sugar, and if you don't want to make the glaze, I can handle that with Gwen while you mix the ingredients. Does that sound like a good compromise?"

Sid paused, then nodded. "I'm sorry for getting upset, Gwen."

I watched her intensely, hoping she looked my way. She was about to cry, I could tell. I wanted to be there for her but I knew it'd cross a line if I went over. She did meet my eyes for just a moment, though. She took a deep breath and apologized too.

My heart swelled with pride. I looked down at the table with a small smile, and noticed Genette was smiling too.

"How much does this recipe make?" Ripley asked Jason as he came by to see how we were doing.

"Sixteen brownies."

"That's gonna be a lot of brownies," I said as I poured the vanilla extract into the bowl while Genette mixed.

"Well, if we each have one, plus the three counselors, plus Shebal and Hafsa's two dads, and their sister, and Shebal's husband, that's seven, ten, twelve, thirteen, fourteen…" Ripley counted on his hands. "Oh! Then Big and Little Gus both get one. That's sixteen. So everyone can have two."

"Smart," Jason said.

"Oh, but that leaves out Gobett and Jegmet," he said with a pensive frown.

"They don't like brownies," Hafsa yelled. "Sorry for listening!"

"It's okay! That's good to know anyway," he called back, giving her a thumbs up.

"But what about our families?" Gwen said.

"Oh yeah," Hafsa added. "Miraf and Jolly like brownies."

Jason rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "We just don't have enough sugar for that…"

"And this batter's nearly done," Sid told her. "We'd need to make a new batch even if they got more sugar."

She pouted.

"Hey, we can always do it later before you go home," Jason offered. "They'd be fresher then too."

"Okay!"

We added our cocoa, cinnamon, flour, salt, and baking powder while Genette mixed. Abigail took Gwen into the kitchen to get the icing sugar and a little bowl. When our batter was smooth and uniform, Jason brought Genette into the kitchen to pour it into the pan. Ripley followed to help.

Acutely aware that it was just me and Henry out here, I tried to clean up the measuring cups and spoons to bring them to the sink, but I couldn't bear it. My chest squeezed and my throat closed up. I all but ran outside, sinking into the grass and struggling to steady my breathing.

When I came back in, we were all just hanging out waiting for the brownies to cook. It would take about half an hour, I remembered from reading the recipe. Jason put on music and Hafsa danced, her long golden skirt swaying beautifully. Abigail joined her after she'd thrown the aprons in the communal laundry bin. Genette got up and offered to dance with me,

but when I felt Henry's eyes on me, I blurted that I had to go wash the dishes.

"It's okay, Ava," Jason started to say, but I quickly passed him to the kitchen door.

"I'd really like to," I insisted, and he let me.

We distributed the brownies fresh from the oven. The cinnamon one was so good, and while I liked the basic brownie and the lemon glaze separately, together they didn't really compliment each other. I didn't let on to Gwen, though; I knew she was too proud of her work. It would break her heart to know her big sister didn't like what she made.

After dinner, still a bit damp from my shower, I tried to offer to clean up when everyone else had finished, but I was told I'd done enough already. Gwen noticed how I barely ate, so she gave me one of the meal replacement drinks she took from me before we came here. It felt good to have something in my stomach, even though my throat still ached.

While Hafsa and Ripley were helping clean up, I talked with Genette, Sid, and Gwen outside by the fire pit. Henry walked out of our cabin, head down, making us all falter. I watched him swing between the cabins and vanish into the woods. I wanted to say something but couldn't.

"Did you just see that?" Genette hissed.

I nodded.

"Where's he going?" Gwen asked, her face painted with fear. "I can't sit around and wait to find out. I have to get Red!"

Sid jumped up as she did, running after her into the woods. Genette and I were right behind them. Crashing through the woods, nearly blind with only the rosy dusk sunlight light to guide us, I quickly lost sight of my sister and Genette's brother. I reached out to grab her hand, afraid of losing her too if she

went too fast.

"It's okay," she whispered as we stopped for a moment.

"Do you still know where he went?" I asked breathlessly.

"Where else?" she said with a grim frown. We raced on.

Darkness fell around us quickly. The moon was up, but it was only visible through openings in the trees, and I was starting to jump at every sound. We had to stop often and I started to feel like Genette was holding me back on purpose. I confronted her on it and she got closed off immediately.

"Please don't lie to me." I squeezed her hand.

She held her ground for a minute, but closed her eyes and rubbed away a falling tear. "I don't want you to get hurt again, Ava. You mean too much to me." She lowered her voice. "You know I would have… He'd have needed an ambulance if nobody stopped me."

My face twisted. "He's… He's still my brother," I said, but it hurt. "And Gwen's my little sister. I'm not going to leave her!"

Gwen's loud, high pitched scream broke the night air. Genette's eyes widened and I ran. She didn't let go of my hand. The clearing we stumbled into was surprisingly close, and we nearly crashed into Gwen and the foal.

Gwen screamed again, jumping away from me. I reached out to her and she grabbed my hands and pulled herself back to me, still being a barrier between Red and Henry. He was a few feet away, I saw as the rest of the scene opened up for me. He was looming, as dark as the shadows, holding something that flashed silver when the branches above parted in the wind.

A knife.

"Sid?" Genette's whisper caught me off guard as she moved closer to me.

I looked around; Sid wasn't there. Where was he?

Genette gave a short, blunt little laugh. "Oh, Henry. What do you think you've done?" she said, shaking her head. I've never seen her this mad. It was terrifying, but not how I was used to. "I never trusted you. I know you know that. But I didn't think it would get this far. Oh, no, Henry. This isn't gonna be fun for you."

She stepped forward.

She raised her fist.

He raised the knife.

"No!"

Genette yelped and hit the ground. I stumbled to avoid stepping on her. My arm felt wet, then stung brightly. Henry glanced at the knife, which I could see was dripping now, then at Genette. I clutched my arm, hot liquid rushing to meet my fingers. I moved my hand away. I wasn't too shocked to see the dark stain on my hands, but when I looked back up, Henry was.

He looked like he might cry.

"Henry," I said slowly, "I'm not mad at you. I know it's hard, but you can stop. You can let yourself stop."

His mouth twitched like he wanted to say something. I could see his shoulders relaxing minutely, hear his breathing slow just a touch. Was it really working? Could I talk my brother back into being my brother?

Gwen couldn't handle it, though. "You're a monster, Henry!" she spat, trembling. "You're no better than our father!"

The moment he snapped was visible. His eyes went blank and his mouth curled into a snarl. He plunged forward, grabbing Red's short mane and yanking him up. Gwen shouted at him. The foal shrieked and struggled as Henry's knife came down and—

There was a horrible scream and a crash. A white shape

reared up through the brush and Henry toppled. Red scrambled between Gwen's legs. A hoof came down on either side of my brother, and I looked up to see the white kelpie from the beach, coat slick with sweat and water, and on his back was Sid, his black hair plastered to his face.

I fell to my knees, half in relief and half in rage. I grabbed Henry by his shoulders and pulled him onto his back. He stared up at me, his eyes no longer glazed over, but brimming with tears.

"It's over, Henry," I said, not hiding how broken I felt. "You can't do this anymore."

He closed his eyes and the tears poured down his cheeks.

Chapter Twenty Four (Sid)

Tuesday barely made sense. After we carried Henry back to camp, it all came out to Jason and Abigail. Well, all but my white kelpie. He left me at the treeline. Nobody was mad, at least not outwardly. Ava's arm was bandaged in a hurry. Jason gave us a long and painful talk after Ava told him everything Henry had done, but it was hard to listen to someone telling us not to hurt each other and not to hide that from him. It was hard to listen to anything he said, really. None of it felt real.

He decided that Henry would be sent home.

After that, we dealt with Red. Turns out he was actually almost dead from lack of food and water. Gwen bawled her eyes out while Abigail gave her, Ripley, Hafsa and myself a stern but gentle talk about the importance of keeping wildlife safe while not treating them like toys or pets. Again, it kind of went over me like water. I was too in my head. Thinking about it, though, I really should have said something. The poor foal was so weak.

Gwen vowed to take everything more seriously amid her apologies. Jason started planning to build a split stable stall and bedroom for him so he'd have a place to live, since he figured he was the foal of the mare that died. He was a bit premature and lucky to be alive, he told us. He would have to be raised as

Jason's own child.

"I've raised orphaned wildlife before, all kinds, but never a kelpie," Jason admitted as he bottle fed the foal. "It's going to be different, since he does have a human form and is as much of a person as you and me."

"Like raising an orphaned catfolk," Hafsa observed, but she was clearly not really here either. She kept giving me long, concerned looks. I didn't know how to show her I was okay. At least mostly okay.

By Wednesday evening, after we had a big but tense pizza lunch together, after we watched the bus drive off with Henry and all his things, after Jason had speedily finished building what he called Red's summer home as an extension of the counselors' cabin, we all started to relax. We talked more, not really about anything. It was still tense, especially between Ava and Gwen, but there was noticeably a weight lifted.

Abigail made us apple pie for dessert, which was really nice, but I wasn't feeling well enough to eat it. She saved me a slice in the fridge for tomorrow. When the counselors were putting the dinner dishes in the sink, I quietly told everyone I was going to see the white kelpie. I told them that I had been seeing him, that's why he saved me, that's why he came with me to stop Henry. They understood, but were concerned, especially my sister and Hafsa. Ripley asked me how I'd managed to make friends with him in his horse form, if he'd ever trapped me, if he'd ever hurt me. I barely had time to tell him that no, he was always kind, before Abigail and Jason returned.

"What're you talking about?" Jason asked, trying to hide the edge of caution in his voice.

"Oh, just what we'll do after dinner," I answered quickly. "I'm going to go for a walk though. Is that okay?"

He and Abigail shared a look, then Abigail said, "Of course, have fun and be safe, Sid."

Gwen jumped up. "Can I go see Red?"

Jason nodded. "Want to help me feed him?"

She nodded eagerly, picking up her plate.

"Oh, he won't eat that," he said. "He needs milk and fish right now—"

"It's for me," she said, blushing. "It's really good."

Abigail laughed. "I'm glad you like it!"

We left together. Gwen asked if I wanted to come, just to see the room. I noticed her almost reach out to hold my hand and I had to carefully not reach back. I wanted to, though.

"Sure," I said, looking straight ahead.

Red was curled, exhausted, in a pile of soft hay. Gwen sighed, relieved and happy, when she saw the place and how well he was adjusting. It was a nice, cozy little stall with a door in the back corner. Jason said that's the way to the bedroom part, and there's another door that goes into the main building. The stall had a half wall at the front with a thick plastic curtain that would keep out the rain, wind, and bugs, but let it be open and help him feel less boxed in. There was a trough of water for drinking, plus a deep pool, with plumbing that Big Gus had helped him install. On the wall, there was a bucket for solid food, and a shelf with empty milk bottles and formula powder. Jason went inside to heat up water and make his formula.

Alone with Gwen, I tried to piece together how I could ask why she suddenly was paying a lot of attention to me and trying to hold my hand. If she had a crush on me, that would be fine. I would just want to know. But the thought of that gave me butterflies and I couldn't explain why. I mean, yes I could. Nobody's ever had a crush on me before. At least not that I

know of. But Gwen was just a really good friend, surely?

I looked over at her. She was smiling down at the sleeping foal, her eyes shining with pride and love, her hands delicately held over her belly. Nervously, I asked what she was thinking about.

"I'm just so happy he's got a safe place to grow up," she said, then looked like she might cry. "I feel so horrible that I didn't notice how bad he was doing…"

"You had your heart in the right place," Jason said from behind us, making us both jump. He laughed and apologized. "Would you like to stay to watch him eat?"

Gwen immediately said yes, and I excused myself.

I still had some things to do, deep in the woods.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to take the walk slow or if I just wanted to get it over with. I kept changing speed, alternating between lightly jogging and lingering to look at flowers, broken sticks, and clumps of plants. After a while it felt too much like self sabotage and I picked up the pace.

When I got to the beach, it was empty. My heart dropped. I didn't know what I expected, though. I had yelled at him to leave me alone, and the only reason he found me the other night was that I ran to the beach, crying for help.

I wasn't begging now. I wasn't desperate.

Sitting down with my legs crossed, I picked up an empty shell and used the flat edge to draw in the sand. Around me, crickets chirped and fireflies blinked. A distant owl hooted and if I hushed my breathing I could faintly make out the sounds of coyotes on the mainland. None of these creatures knew me. They probably didn't think of me at all. Maybe that's how it should be, how it should have been all along. Anonymous to the woods. Making friends with my own kind.

Falling in love with my own kind. Like Gwen.

But I was in love with Hafsa too, wasn't I?

I brushed a tear from my face with a defeated sigh. What difference did it make?

I dropped the shell and forced myself to get up. It was pointless to sit out here and get eaten alive by bugs and shame. But as I turned my back on the water, I heard movement.

I looked over my shoulder and at his face.

"You came," I murmured. A tear fell off my chin.

He shook out his mane and nickered softly. I turned and started walking towards him, but I couldn't keep myself from running and throwing my arms around his neck. I buried my face in his wet mane and sobbed. He'd never spoken a word to me, I didn't even know his name, but…

He leaned away after a good long while. I held on, but at an arm's length. Steadying my breathing, I focused on his eyes. They always grounded me. He didn't let me look long, though, as he reached to nibble my hair affectionately. I shuddered as I tried not to cry again, petting his strong, warm neck. He was really so unlike me. And as I'd been shown, he was much more able to kill than me. I'd spent every day since the attack dreaming of him, wanting to feel his presence again, but so terrified. Even now, as I listened to his snuffly breathing and his constant quiet purring, there was something deep in the pit of my stomach that told me to get away from him.

I took a sudden step back and he backed off. Peering at me with his beautiful, intelligent eyes, he tried to read me. Maybe he did read me. My eyes welled up with tears and I blinked them away, looking at the water that went nearly up to my knees. The ripples rolling away from me turned black and I scrambled back up to the shore, splashing, my heart hammering. Standing,

trembling, staring down at the glowing white kelpie, I couldn't figure out why he wasn't moving.

As I started to calm down, he matched my breathing.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I swallowed and spoke again, "I'm sorry."

But what else was there to say?

He raised his hoof to the surface of the water, making ripples, like he was going to paw at the water and invite me in. But he just put it back down. He looked up at the sky, full of the first stars with the moon rising. It was getting late. I shivered but I wasn't cold at all.

I didn't turn my back on him at first as I walked back up the bank, right to the treeline. He kept his eyes on me the whole time, only moving to shift his weight. I let out a final heavy sigh before turning and walking up the trail. Halfway home, I heard him keening, a long, slow sound that filled my mind. But it was only once.

When I got back, Hafsa was waiting for me at the door, illuminated by the lantern. She wasn't even in her pajamas, but she looked exhausted.

"Oh," I said awkwardly, "why aren't you in bed?"

She laughed, short and nervous. "I wanted to make sure you'd get home safe."

"Of course I would." It did make me feel good, though.

She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes. She sniffled and took the two steps towards me that closed the gap between us, pulling me into a hug. Shocked, I put my arms around her back, not really knowing what to do with myself. She buried her face in my neck, squeezing me tight. She really had to bend over to get her face there; she was several inches taller than me and I honestly hadn't noticed until now. When she did eventually

pull away, she held my shoulders for a moment longer before she had to let go and wipe tears from her face. She then gave a little embarrassed smile and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I was just worried about you. I'm glad you're okay."

"It's okay," was all I could manage to say. I had suddenly made sense of something: when she asked me several nights ago if I had a crush on anyone, she was talking about when Genette teased me at dinner. I had been thinking about the kelpie. But after tonight, I think the real crush had been staring me in the face the whole time.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, breaking my thoughts. When I focused on her face, she looked down shyly and gave herself a little squeeze.

"Sleeping," I said with a lighthearted smile.

She laughed and pushed me a little. "Let's go to bed. It's been a long day."

"Too long," I agreed, and we went inside. "Is Gwen asleep?"

Hafsa nodded as she carefully shut the door, the last of the light disappearing. "She stayed up for you too, though," she whispered, "but fell asleep about half an hour ago. I tucked her in."

Something about that made my heart do a flip. I was glad it was pitch black, or else she would have seen how much I was blushing.

I said goodnight and climbed up to my bed. Falling asleep listening to their breathing, I still felt her hug.

Chapter Twenty Five (Ava)

Cinders leaped into the air as Sid poked at the fire logs. Abigail was laughing with Ripley and Hafsa about something, and beside me Genette was excitedly sharing sewing tips with my little sister. At my other side, Jason offered me a s'more. As I took a bite, I felt warm and light, free from everything that had been happening this month. Maybe from my whole life.

"It's too bad Shebal couldn't be here," I said, changing how I was sitting on the log and brushing bits of wood off my thighs.

"Yeah," Jason said, "but he deserves the rest too."

I nodded.

Genette jabbed me in the arm.

"Hey!" I swatted her away playfully. "What do you want?"

"You never told me you could sing!"

I rolled my eyes and groaned. "Gwen!"

She laughed and ruffled my hair while Gwen giggled in delight.

"You can sing?" Abigail asked.

I blushed all the way up to the tips of my ears. "Not you too…"

There was a sly twinkle in her eyes as she said, "Why don't we have a little singing competition?"

"Maybe not a competition," Hafsa snorted. "I can easily wipe the floor with all of you."

"Bet," Ripley said.

"Oh yeah?" She raised an eyebrow.

The two took turns singing for a couple songs each; Hafsa was better at slow, dreamy love songs and Ripley chose radio pop songs, but they were both incredibly good. Ripley was a little awkward, because his voice kept cracking and wasn't quite high nor low, but it didn't stop him from being an excellent singer. We cheered for them after each song.

"Okay, that's it for me," he said with a cough when he was finished. "My throat hurts too much."

"Who won?" Hafsa asked Abigail right away.

She laughed. "I thought you said it wasn't a competition!"

We all laughed, but that reminded Abigail that I was the reason we were doing this, and she asked me to go next.

Genette grabbed my hand. "I'll sing with you," she said. "It'll be fun."

"Oh, I don't know…"

She leaned closer, saying, "Come on, Ava, I'm sure your voice is lovely…"

We ended up singing one of my favorite songs, but I was so embarrassed I had to keep my eyes closed. Everyone cheered and clapped for us when we were done, but I couldn't look; I buried my face in my hands and giggled.

As the night went on, our chatting and joking led to us listening to Jason's stories about saving orphaned and injured wildlife, and his frequent area-wide potlucks that he holds for those in need. He even told us, though he got a bit humble, that sometimes he took homemade food up to the cities and towns outside of Silent Woods, driving around in his truck and stopping at shelters and whenever he spotted someone obviously needing a hand.

"You've gotta give back to the world and the people around you," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "because in the end, that's all we've really got."

Gwen, Ripley and I all got teary, so Jason offered to give us each a hug. I leaned into him as he squeezed me and I had the wild thought that maybe I could run away and live with him. But then, I realized, who would look after my little sister? And my big brother?

I wiped my cheeks with my wrists; they were wetter than I thought. Genette put her arm around me and hugged me tight.

"How about we all have a big group hug?" Ripley suggested after he and Jason hugged.

With enthusiastic agreement all around, we stood off to the side of the fire and piled in for a big hug. There were a few more criers and a lot of second hugs. I hadn't felt this close to a group of people ever in my life.

Abigail dried the corners of her eyes delicately as she told us it was probably best if we all went to bed.

"But I'm not tired," Gwen complained, then gave a huge yawn.

Ripley, Sid, and I all laughed at her, and she laughed at herself, too.

While Jason put the fire out, I told Genette I'd be a minute late to bed. I found Gwen as she was going into her cabin and stopped her.

"What's up?" she asked, looking concerned around a yawn.

"I'm just proud of you," I said, my heart filling with love, "for everything. For the hugs, for Red, for Henry… You've been so strong this month. For your whole life you've been strong." I had to stop to steady my breathing or I'd cry again. "I don't tell you that enough, Gwen."

She covered her smile and tears ran over her fingers. "I love

you, Ava."

"I love you too, Gwen."

She wiped her face on the bottom of her shirt and sighed shakily, but happily. "Goodnight," she said, opening the door.

"Goodnight," I said, and lingered a moment before heading back to my own cabin. She didn't say it, but I knew she was proud of me back. And I was proud of myself, too.

Back in my cabin, it was very quiet. Ripley was in bed already and Genette was in the washroom. I sat on the corner of my bed, trying not to let myself realize that I was staring at the empty space where his bed still sat. A black hole, it drew me in.

The bathroom door opened, casting light across the floor for a moment. Genette waved at me sleepily before turning the light off with a soft click. She walked over and, at a whisper, asked if I was alright.

I wanted to say yes, everything's fine, I'm just tired, but I listlessly shook my head instead.

"May I sit with you?"

I nodded and scooted over. She sat beside me and put her arms around me. I welcomed her weight on my side, slowly bringing one arm around her waist and pulling her closer. I felt sick to my stomach, but it wasn't from nerves about touching her. The rawness of this pain, the hole Henry left in me, was far too consuming.

"Is it him?" she asked, her breath tickling the back of my neck as she nestled her chin on my shoulder.

I nodded again, not sure how to speak around the ache. Closing my eyes didn't change much against the dark, so I left them open, tracking, in my mind's eye, the movements of her hand up and down my arm. I sighed pitifully and she pulled me closer, shifting so she was leaning her full weight on me so

she didn't have to balance on one hand. She stroked my hair now, telling me gently that it was okay. That she was here for me. And I knew that was all she could do. This wound was too deep to kiss better, but that wasn't her job in the first place.

After what felt like a lifetime, I finally felt relaxed enough to get under my thin sheet to go to sleep. Genette stood up and gave me a final little pet as she told me to sleep well. Before she had even gotten a foot away, I called after her.

She opened my curtain quietly and whispered, "What's up?"

"Is it okay if you, um," I froze. I didn't think the sentence all the way through.

She hovered for a minute, maybe two, then slowly closed the curtain again. The bed creaked with her weight as she settled down beside me. It was strange, but in this position I could tell how tall she was better than when we stood together. She was taller than me, though it wasn't by too much. She was much taller than Sid, and the tallest of us aside from Jason, so I really should have noticed, but I guess there were other things on my mind. About her or not. Now all I could think about was her. It felt selfish at first, because I felt like I had to mourn and be hurt over my brother. But maybe I don't have to right now, at least.

Maybe this can be about me, and my happiness, for once.

Blindly, I reached out to touch her shoulder, but I nearly poked her in the eye instead. We muffled laughter into our hands as she pressed mine against her cheek. It fit perfectly in my palm. I felt safe. I hoped she did too.

She moved closer and my hand slipped around to the back of her neck. I felt her breath on my face and I closed my eyes. I felt my heart beating through my whole body and I was worried that I was shaking because she was so close to me, her nose

brushing mine.

"Is this," she paused, "is this okay? Is it what you want?"

I nodded for what felt like the hundredth time and then she kissed me. She pulled away and asked if that was okay, and I asked too at the same time, then we had to not laugh again or else we'd wake up Ripley. Then she scooted back, making the bed creak again, and told me goodnight for the second time. My curtain shuffled closed and she left, but I was sure I'd never be alone again.

I fell asleep easier that night than any other night in my life.

Chapter Twenty Six (Sid)

We headed out for a walk in the morning, just me, Ripley, Hafsa, and Gwen, alone in the woods. We shared two cans of mandarin slices between us, me holding one and Ripley holding the other, all our fingers sticky from the syrup. The sweet, metallic fruit helped cool us down. It was actually cooler in the forest, hidden from the sun by droopy pines and tall maples, but that's where all the bugs were, and they were attracted to our syrupy hands. Ripley fashioned a fan out of a stick, some green leaf stems, and a bushel of ferns, so we each took turns fanning ourselves and the others. When we finished the mandarins, Hafsa wiped her fingers on her jeans.

"I have nowhere to wipe my hands," Gwen whined, shaking them. She was wearing a pair of blue tights and said she didn't want to get them dirty.

"Sorry, I don't have any tissues," I said.

Ripley patted his pockets. "Me neither."

Hafsa raised her hands. "Don't you do what I think you're going to do."

Gwen grinned playfully and jumped forward, trying to wipe her hands on Hafsa's pants. She dodged out of the way, telling her to stop while laughing. Ripley started digging through his pockets frantically. As Hafsa made to climb up a tree, Ripley

pulled out a crumpled packet of tissues.

"Here! Gwen!" he said through laughter.

"Subhanallah," Hafsa exclaimed as Gwen dried her hands. Then she whipped a pinecone at her.

"Hey!" Gwen squealed. "What was that for?"

"What do you think?" I said, picking up a pinecone off the ground.

"Not you too!"

I threw it at her and she smacked it out of the air.

"Awesome!" Ripley said. "Can you do it twice in a row?" He threw one too.

She squealed and tried to hit it but it just bounced off her arm. We all burst out laughing and started throwing pinecones at each other until one almost hit Ripley in the eye. Picking bits of leaves and pinecones out of our hair, we sat down on and beside the big rock. I remembered when I was sitting here trying to eat after sneaking out one time. Looking around at my friends' smiling faces, feeling how happy we all were, this was much better.

"You know," Hafsa said, repinning her hijab after pulling a stem out of one of the folds, "I'm so glad I met all of you. Even though Gwen and I started off rocky."

Gwen's cheeks flushed and she murmured an apology.

"Me too," Ripley said with a big smile. "You're all really important to me. It's kind of hard for me to make friends, especially at school or even just in the city. People think I'm, well, weird. So even though I try my hardest to be friendly, I rarely make friends."

Gwen nodded. "I've always been told I'm too whiny and I'm stupid. You three make me feel accepted for who I am."

"Of course we accept you," Hafsa and I said at the same time,

then laughed.

"We all accept each other," Ripley said.

We all nodded.

"I hope we stay friends," I said, looking at Hafsa. "I know it'll be hard, because we live so far apart, but…"

"I don't want to lose any of you," Gwen said, then sniffled.

"Oh, don't cry, Gwen," I said. "We don't have any tissues for you."

We all giggled a bit and she wiped her cheeks, apologizing.

"No, it's fine," I said, not wanting her to feel bad. "I was just teasing."

"I think we are gonna stay friends," Ripley said. "I can feel it."

Hafsa agreed. "I'll make sure to visit you whenever I can. Over the summer might be hard but on weekends during school I can try to get a ride to see you."

"We should exchange phone numbers at least," Ripley said, pulling out his phone. "We both live in Ottawa so maybe we can drive together to one of your houses?"

Gwen smiled. "Alan and Aileen would like to have you over, I'm sure," she said. "But there is a baby."

"That's alright," Ripley said. "I have little cousins so I'm good with kids."

We all exchanged numbers and sent a text to each other so we knew we got the number right. Then we talked more about our families, our homes, school, and planning visits. It sounded the best to go to Gwen's place since it was so big and was on a lake, but my place had a lot of farmland and forest to explore, and both of Ripley's houses were really nice. Hafsa's place was small, but her human family makes the best manakeesh in the whole city, so we all were excited to meet them and try it.

Gwen started sniffling again. "I'm gonna miss you guys so

much. I can't believe camp's almost over!"

"It flew by," Ripley said. "I'm excited for next year! Will you all come again?"

"I have to do summer school next year," Gwen said as she wiped her eyes. "I want to get ahead of my classes. Aileen wants me to apply to the best universities so I have to make room in my schedule for prerequisites."

"Shebal said I have to make up for this by staying with my family and helping out next year."

"I want to try to come back," I said, "but I think we'll be hosting my relatives from up north next summer for a couple weeks. My uncle hasn't seen them for a long time and we've been saving to get them down here."

As they asked me more questions about my relatives, I noticed how much attention Gwen paid to me, how much she wanted to know. I must be looking into it too much, but she really did care about me. And how willing she was to touch me made me feel special. Maybe I was special to her, but I already felt I was special to Hafsa, and I knew I liked her…

I sighed abruptly. Even if I did like Gwen too, that would be too complicated. We couldn't all be together.

Could we?

"Sid? What's wrong?" Gwen asked.

"What?"

"You sighed," she said, looking worried. "You sounded upset."

"Oh, sorry," I said, embarrassed. "I was just in my own head a bit."

There was a quiet moment and Gwen's expression got even more worried.

"Is everything okay?" Hafsa asked, reaching out to her.

Gwen touched her hand for a moment, then hurriedly pulled

her hair. "I… I was trying to find a way to tell you that, like, went with the conversation," she said, and my heart raced, "but there's no good way to say it. Guys, I think… I think I'm nonbinary."

"Oh," I whispered, trying not to show the pang of disappointment I felt because she wasn't revealing her feelings about what I'd been thinking about.

"That's great," Ripley said brightly. "I'm happy for you!"

She blushed and wrapped her hair around her fingers. "I'd still like to use she pronouns, and I like my name," she said, her voice still a little shaky.

"Of course," Ripley said. "If you change your mind about anything, don't be shy to tell us."

She nodded. "Is that, like, allowed? To use she/her and be nonbinary?"

Hafsa nodded. "You can call yourself anything you want and use whatever pronouns you want. That stuff doesn't define your gender, only you can do that."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm a boy because I say I'm a boy, not because people call me him. And even though I wear guy's clothes, I still wear a sports bra because I don't want to bind my chest, and that doesn't take anything away from me being a guy."

Ripley nodded. "That's right. And Gwen, you can do anything you want for your medical transition, too. You don't even need to medically transition if you don't want to. Not changing your name, pronouns, or presentation doesn't make you not nonbinary. Like Hafsa and Sid said, that's decided by you saying what your gender is." He smiled and looked a little shy. "Double, triple, upside down, banana split with whipped cream promise."

"What's that?" Gwen asked.

"It means that's a very serious promise," he explained. "It's what I do with my dad. You have to say it back."

"We all will," I offered.

He nodded enthusiastically and we all said it together.

"You know best about your own gender and comfort," Hafsa concluded. "I'm proud of you, Gwen."

She covered her face, but I could still see her blushing down to her chest. "You're gonna make me cry again! You guys are so good to me."

"It's what you deserve," Ripley said. "And hey, if you do cry again, I just found another tissue in my pocket."

We all laughed at that. Then we decided to go back to camp. Gwen seemed a bit overwhelmed about everything, but eventually warmed up to asking us all sorts of things about being trans: what testosterone was like, which Ripley answered, what estrogen was like out of curiosity, which Hafsa answered, and what her options were if she didn't want to take hormones at all, which I answered. She also asked how to tell people, and if she should if she wasn't changing anything.

"If you're comfortable telling people, then you should," I said.

"But don't feel bad if you need to hide that for your safety," Ripley added. "Hiding doesn't make you any less of anything."

Hafsa nodded. "It's your business who knows and who doesn't."

"I think I want to tell the other campers," she said with a determined smile. "Jason and Abigail too. And Shebal if I see him again."

Back at camp, Gwen wanted us to help her come out to everyone, so we were with her for support while she told people individually. It must have been easier for her without Henry here to bully her. Jason gave her an awkward but loving little speech about how he accepts all of us and is proud of us, then Genette asked if we could play tug of war.

"For once we won't need Abigail on one of our teams," Hafsa pointed out as Jason fetched the rope.

Abigail looked up from digging the line in the grass with her shoe. "Am I not cool anymore?"

Hafsa and I laughed and reassured her that she's still cool.

"How about Jason and I both play?" she suggested. "I don't want to miss out on the fun."

"Who's gonna watch the middle line then?" Ava asked.

"I have an idea," Abigail said, then walked out to the woods.

"What's she doing?" Gwen asked her sister.

She shrugged.

Moments later, she came back with a squirrel on her shoulder.

"Oh, she can talk to animals," I remembered.

She left the squirrel sitting near the middle line while we split into teams. It was me, Abigail, Genette, and Gwen on one side, and Jason, Ripley, Ava, and Hafsa on the other. The squirrel flagged his tail when the rope was in position. Then we pulled. We wrestled for a long time, Ripley falling down the most. I slipped once too. Eventually, it was Hafsa's team that won, and we celebrated with ice cream for everyone.

"But the losers have to scoop it," Hafsa commanded.

Abigail thanked the squirrel, gave him some peanuts, and let him on his way.

Lunch was fish and Greek salad. Before we got our food, I went to my cabin to use the washroom, but I walked in on Hafsa praying so I waited outside so I wouldn't disturb her. When she came out, she was surprised to see me and laughed nervously as she said hello. I was going to ask her what was up, but she thrust a folded piece of paper into my hands before running off to the dining hall.

Confused, I unfolded the paper. It read:

```
Sid,
Hi. I don't really know how to say this, so I'm just
going to say it: I really like you. You're really
cool and fun to be around and you make me feel like I
belong. I don't let it show but I feel like an
outsider a lot of the time, but you've never made me
feel that way. I want to meet your family and I
really hope you meant it when you agreed that we
would stay friends. I would like to know you forever.
Hafsa
```

I folded it back up and put it in my pocket, unsure what to do with myself. Hurrying to lunch, I ate quickly without looking at Hafsa even once. I knew that would make her feel bad, and I really didn't want that, but I didn't have a clue what I'd do if she talked to me. Or even looked at me.

When we were finished eating, I slipped off, while the others were either feeding Red or Baby, and went for a walk in the woods. That would help clear my head and get my thoughts in order. I tried to take a new path, but I ended up passing the big rock and getting closer to the beach than I intended. Hovering for a long time, I weighed my options: go back to camp and face Hafsa, or risk seeing the kelpie again after what I swore to myself would be our last meeting. I decided I wasn't ready to see Hafsa yet and walked out onto the sand.

Once again, I was alone. I didn't look around for him this time, instead sitting in the sand and pulling out the letter. I read it over a couple times, admiring her messy handwriting, liking how she wrote my name. It hit me that this is what I had wanted all along, for her to like me back. Looking out at

the lake, I had to think about the kelpie, if he liked me back. If that was allowed. But I shook my head and got rid of those thoughts. Right now, what was confirmed and allowed, was Hafsa. And thinking back to all the nights I spent longing for the kelpie, I had the same feeling in my heart now, reading this letter, thinking of knowing her forever…

I stood up, feeling myself blushing all the way down to my chest. Gently folding the letter and putting it back in my pocket, I was glad I was alone. I ran up the bank to the treeline, but stopped as I hit the grass. Looking over my shoulder, I watched the water lapping at the sand, leaving it darker every time. Squinting to see the far shore, I thought for a moment I could see a white figure walking alone in the shallows. I sighed softly and slipped into the trees.

The scars on my arm ached.

When I got back to camp, Abigail was relieved to see me. She chided me about wandering off without telling anyone and I apologized. We were about to play badminton. I was against Hafsa and I found her to be playing worse than she did last time we played. I was a bit distracted, too. After a couple games, Abigail showed us how to make ice cream so we could cool off in the dining hall. I still couldn't quite look at Hafsa, let alone talk to her, which was ridiculous because I definitely did want her to like me back.

We had fish again for dinner, and our homemade ice cream for dessert. It seemed that only Hafsa and I were still happy with how much fish we'd had this summer. She teased Ava about it and I found myself laughing a little too much.

While the other kids were chatting, she scooted a bit closer to me and asked, "Have you read my note?"

I nodded, nearly choking on my fruit punch.

She put her hand on the seat between us. I could see her trying to think of something to say, but nothing came out. I put my hand next to hers, feeling her warmth. Looking down at my food, I tried my best to move my fingers closer without going too fast. I wanted to ask her if it was okay but nothing would come out of my mouth. But she touched my hand first. I probably turned dark red all over. It was a little awkward and stiff, but we eventually figured out how to turn our fingers so we were holding hands. I'd never been so happy in my life.

Chapter Twenty Seven (Ava)

I woke up early on the last day of camp and sat at the fire pit to watch the sunrise. I was too anxious to sleep; I'd been tossing and turning for a few hours. I had to get out of the cabin or else I'd start packing and wake everyone up.

At breakfast, Jason and Abigail sat with us and shared our several huge pancake stacks. There were blueberries, fresh maple syrup, whipped cream, and sliced bananas as toppings, and we each got as much chocolate milk as we wanted.

"It's been a rough month," Jason said, "and we're all sad to say it's time to go home, but we've all certainly had some great times. My favorite was finally getting to join in on one of the activities when we played tug of war."

"I liked baking with you, and sharing my family recipes," Abigail said.

"I loved making brownies too," Gwen said, then turned to her friends, "but my favorite part of camp was getting to know you guys and myself."

"That was great, baking brownies," Genette agreed. "But I also think that the people were the best part of this." She squeezed my hand under the table.

"I'm glad you liked the brownies," Jason interjected. "I remembered how sad you were that you couldn't bring them

home, so I made you enough for all your families."

"In both flavors?" Gwen asked.

"In both flavors."

"Yes!"

I giggled. She was so cute.

"What about you, Ava?" Genette prompted. "What did you enjoy the most?"

I thought for a moment. Fishing, archery, that awesome game we invented together, exploring this magical island… "Making real friends."

I clearly heard my brother teasing me for being so sappy.

"I liked the game we made up," Sid said. "And just being here was so cool."

"Me too," Hafsa said. "And climbing trees!"

"You all know what I liked best," Ripley said, and we all chuckled at that.

We talked for a bit more, but I was feeling a bit strange now. When my phone buzzed in my pocket, I jumped up. Everyone looked.

"Sorry," I stammered, "phone call."

Running outside, I checked who was calling. Aileen? Was something wrong?

I picked up and said hello.

"Hi Ava," she said cheerfully. "Is this a bad time? You sound out of breath."

"This is a good time. Is everything okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart, I'm just calling to check up on you. I'm sorry for not calling earlier, I didn't know when would be good for you… And it has been busy here," she sighed heavily, "but that's expected. How are you doing? Have you packed yet?"

"I'm okay, and no, we just finished breakfast," I said. "We had

pancakes."

"That's a nice breakfast. What have you been doing? Or will you save your stories for this evening?"

I bit my lip. "I'll tell you everything when we get home, but…"

"But?"

"There's this girl here, we're really close friends now," I said awkwardly. I had no idea what her reaction would be to this. I know she and Alan weren't homophobic to other people, or to LGBT people in general, but what if that was different in their personal lives?

"Tell me about her," she encouraged.

"Her name is Genette and she's got a younger brother here, Sid. They're both really cool. They live with Sid's uncle and grandmother in the country. She, Genette, is really smart. She likes bugs and excels in all the sciences."

"Oh, she'll be a great tutor for Gwen next summer, don't you think?"

"Yeah," I said. "So she'd be allowed to come over?"

"Of course, she's your friend. I want you to have friends over, sweetheart."

Genette opened the door and I moved further up the wall. She came to stand with me. She reached for my hand but I was too nervous about this talk to take it.

"It's just that… I don't know how to say this."

Aileen was quiet for a bit, then said softly, "Is Genette maybe more than just a friend?"

My throat got tight. "Yes."

"Oh Ava, that's okay. That's good. You don't have to feel weird or othered by that. Alan and I will always accept you, every part of you. If Genette is someone you love, then we love her too. Unconditionally."

Emotion made me tremble. I didn't expect this at all. "Really?"

"Of course. When we took you in, we weren't just ready for the hardships you had gone through, we were ready for you as people. If you like girls, guys, anybody, or nobody at all, that's okay. That's just a part of you that makes you wonderful. We'd never want you to hide that from us or from yourself, especially not out of fear of what we think of you."

It hadn't really hit me, over all these years, that Aileen and Alan really did love us. Yes, they saved us, yes, they've never not taken great care of us, but after everything else it felt so fake. Or like a trick. Or like we were only there because Cole hadn't been until now. But this broke all that down. I had to apologize and put the phone down for a moment, unable to stop crying. Genette hugged me, stroking my hair and telling me how she was so proud of me, until I was able to get back on the phone.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" Aileen asked gently.

"Yeah," I murmured, my voice wavering. "I… I love you… Mom."

"Oh," she breathed, then audibly sniffled. "I love you too, Ava. I am your mom, I'll always be. You'll always be my daughter."

I didn't know what to say, so I thanked her, then tried to get around the icy feeling in my stomach that still remained. "I… Um. What about Henry?"

She hummed thoughtfully for a moment. "Would you like me to pass the phone to him?"

I froze.

"It's okay. You can hang up at any time. And I promise I wouldn't offer this to you if I thought you'd be endangering yourself."

Genette rubbed my shoulder calmingly.

After a while, I said, "Okay."

There was shuffling on the other end, then Henry saying, "Ava. I'm sorry."

I wanted to say many things. I wanted to tell him to… I just stayed quiet.

"I'm going to therapy now," he went on, his voice almost breaking. "I know now what I did wrong."

"All of it was wrong," I snapped.

He paused. "Yes, it was. I know. I'm sorry, Ava. I know I have to stop being so angry… At myself, at you and Gwen, at our parents, at Aileen and Alan and Cole. At my friends and at school and at the whole damn world." He sighed shakily. "It's all too much, but anger doesn't make it go away or fix it. It just hurts me and hurts you."

I was taken aback by how genuine he sounded. Even when he mocked me and lied about feeling bad or had to apologize because Aileen or Alan caught him harassing one of us, he never sounded like this. I didn't know what to do or say.

"Back in the woods, before I… When I… Tried to hurt Red," he said softly, "I needed to hear what you said to me then. I would have stopped if it was different."

"But it wasn't different," I said. I touched the scar on my arm. "You hurt us all."

He was quiet for a long time. Fear built up in my chest and I froze up again, but when he did speak, it was to say sorry again. He went on to explain that he had set all the traps at the start of camp, after the first tour where the counselors told us about the place. He was choosing his words carefully, avoiding saying too much about the Woods; Aileen was probably listening. He said he felt stupid after his friends made fun of him and he wanted to get back at them and back at the counselors and camp itself. But he never thought he'd actually kill something.

"That's why I was lashing out," he concluded. "Everything was spiraling out of control and I didn't know what to do. I was too far gone by the time I realized I should stop, when I… Hurt you."

"I'll need time," I said immediately. "I'll need time before I can forgive you."

He didn't say anything and I was happy about that.

"Gwen was right, too," I added. "You've brought our father with us."

He inhaled sharply and I steeled myself, but he just whispered, "I understand."

"Thank you," I said, trying to be curt without being unemotional. "I… I gotta go pack now. Tell Aileen bye for me."

"Okay," he said. "Bye. See you soon."

"Yeah," I said, then hung up. I let out a heavy, rattling sigh and rubbed my eyes with my palms.

"That was great, Ava," Genette said, squeezing me. "I'm proud of you."

I pulled her into a hug, resting my head against her chest. She gently kissed the top of my head and I felt butterflies run through my body.

"Genette," I mumbled into her shirt, "do you think this is a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"Should we really be… Together?"

"Can you come up here? I can't hear you," she whispered. "My ears are up here."

I reluctantly looked up at her, shame painting my face. "I… I know this is going to be hard. With Henry. I don't want to drag you into my family problems, especially when this is going to be hard on me, not just him. I don't want to be… Bad for you."

"Ava…" She cupped my cheek with her palm, stroking my cheekbone. I closed my eyes and leaned into her touch. "If you need to wait, then I'll wait for you. But I'm not just going to stop caring about you because things are hard. You matter to me; you, Ava, not just the fun parts of you. And don't you worry about being bad for me. I've been there. I know how to make sure this doesn't go there. Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"I trust you too. And while we don't know what the future holds, I do know that I'm going to be with you, here for you, through anything." She tapped me on the nose and I opened my eyes to see her playful smile. "I also know we should get to packing or we'll never get off this island. And we should probably release Baby."

"He's grown strong enough to go on his own, right?" I asked, letting her help me stand up.

"I think so. Let's ask Jason, okay?"

I nodded. She took my hand and we went on our way. Jason gave the snowspider a clean bill of health, so we went out into the woods near where Genette found him. We put his tank down, opened the lid, and left a small trail of lettuce leaves going into the brush. He had partially constructed a cocoon, though, and wasn't interested in the food. He moved groggily from the lettuce in the tank back to his cocoon.

"Should we just put him and the cocoon in the ground?"

"I think so." She picked him up very gently and placed him between two large, arching roots of a nearby tree, in a space I'd cleared.

We sat for a little while, watching him start to make more of his cocoon. She fanned her eyes so she wouldn't cry and make her makeup run.

I put my arm around her and told her she'd done a great job of taking care of him.

"You really think so?"

"Of course," I said, "look at him. You made him get better and now he's strong enough to survive through the summer."

"Too bad I won't be here in the winter," she said with a sigh as we got up to go.

"You'll just have to call Hafsa so she can ask Shebal if he's seen him."

"Oh, I might just be able to ask Sid to do that for me," she said with a snort. "Have you seen the two of them together?"

"You think they like each other?"

"Definitely. I hope they work up the guts to do something about it."

I laughed. "I hope so too."

Chapter Twenty Eight (Sid)

"Stop throwing stuff at me, I'm trying to pack," I pleaded with Hafsa as I tossed her pillow back at her.

"Then don't keep throwing it back at me!" She smacked me with her pillow instead.

"Hey!" I laughed, picking up my pillow and hitting her. We fought for a couple minutes before I accidentally hit Gwen and felt bad.

I was packing on the floor between their beds, and Gwen had been in a bit of a bad mood since Ava got that phone call at breakfast. She huffed about being hit by a pillow and started to move her stuff outside when Ava came in.

"I have to talk to you for a minute, Gwen," she said.

Gwen dropped her things and hurried outside.

"What do you think that's about?" I asked Hafsa.

She shrugged. "Probably the phone call."

"Yeah."

She whacked me over the head again. We burst into laughter and play fought for a little longer. We froze when the door opened, afraid that it was Gwen and that she'd be in a worse mood, but it wasn't her. Shebal stood in the door, his arms crossed, with a lopsided smile on his face.

"I see you two are having fun," he said. "Maybe a bit too much

fun. Have you let Sid get any packing done yet?"

She frowned and threw her pillow at him.

He threw it back, knocking her onto her bed. "You're gonna be a terrible influence on your niece."

She clambered back up. "That's my job!"

We all laughed, then Shebal told her to let me pack. He left and she sprawled out on her bed, watching me get my things into bags.

"I can't believe you're an aunt," I said, zipping up my suitcase. "I have a cousin who's younger than me, but he's in Nunavut so I never get to see him."

"Yeah," she said, resting her head on her pillow. "It's pretty cool. That's the cousin you'll be seeing next summer, right?"

I nodded.

"It would be cool to meet your family," she said shyly. "I'll miss you."

"You've got my number." I smiled at her. "You won't need to miss me."

Before she could respond, Shebal opened the door again.

"Sorry," he said, "I almost forgot to tell you there's something in the fridge for you."

Hafsa jumped up. "Oh, thanks!"

He held the door for her as she ran out, then asked me if I needed a hand with my bags.

I shook my head. "Do you know where Gwen is?"

She peeked around from behind him.

"Oh, hey," I laughed.

She gave me a halfhearted smile and stepped inside. Shebal let us be and she sat on her bed with a sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just Henry," she said. "I don't want to have to see him

again so soon. Ava said he sounds like he's really sorry for everything, but that's," she held up her age in fingers, "a lot of years to be sorry for."

I nodded solemnly. "I'm sure things will work out, one way or another."

"I hope so."

"You've always got me to talk to," I said warmly. I wanted to reach out to her so she knew she could hold my hand, but something about that felt wrong. I liked Hafsa, Hafsa liked me back…

"Thanks, Sid," she said, blushing and looking down at our bags. "Do you want me to help you bring your stuff to the bus?"

"I was just gonna ask that," Hafsa said as she opened the door. She ran over to give me something wrapped in butcher's paper. "It's the tree sap cake, remember? I'm sorry I didn't get you one, Gwen. I didn't know if you'd want it."

"It's okay," she said, a bit sad.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll have it later."

"But I wanna know how you like it."

I was going to tell her I'd text her, but there was no point in objecting. I unwrapped it carefully. It was a soft cake, sort of like an English muffin but sticky and oozing sap. I took a small bite. I said it was very grassy.

She giggled. "Yeah, it's good, isn't it?"

I nodded and thanked her again. I wrapped it up and put it on top of my suitcase, then went to wash my hands. When I was done, the three of us brought our bags out and across the bridge. Hafsa was awkward about helping us load them onto the bus, taking a long time and letting Ava, Genette, and Ripley go first. Gwen wasn't arguing, chatting with her and making jokes. I watched them as I helped my sister with a heavy bag.

They were so cute together. But as much as they both made me happy, they made me sad, too.

"Come on, guys," Jason said from the bus doors. "We don't have all afternoon."

Shebal came across the dock with a pair of slippers. "Who forgot these?"

"Those are Ava's," Gwen said and ran to get them.

Alone, kind of, with Hafsa, I felt awkward and shy. I tucked my hands behind my back because I wanted to hug her but didn't know how. She quickly got close to me and hugged me tight.

"Don't forget to text me," she whispered.

"I won't," I whispered back. "I promise."

She let me go and Gwen finished loading her bags so we could both get onto the bus. Gwen, however, said she needed to say goodbye to Red, and bolted back across the bridge. She was back in a flash and sat beside me. I sat by the window, watching Hafsa and Shebal wave to us as we drove away. I waved back, as did everyone else.

"I saw that," Genette said when we both turned back around.

"What?"

"You and Hafsa," she teased, pinching my arm.

"Hey!" I pinched her back. "It's not like you and Ava haven't been hugging and—"

She pinched my cheeks to make me stop talking as Ava hid her face in her hands, blushing.

Gwen giggled and said I was right.

"Oh, do you want your cheeks pinched too?"

She squealed and ducked beside me as Genette reached over the seat to pinch her.

"Hey, calm down," Abigail warned, but she was smiling. "You

don't want to rock the bus."

Genette sat back down and left us alone. I picked up the cake and unwrapped it.

"Do you want to share it?" I asked Gwen.

"Sure," she said happily, taking a piece. It pulled apart with long, dripping sap strings. "It does taste like grass," she said after taking a bite.

When she got up to wash her hands, I looked out the window again. Through the sparse trees, I could see the shimmering water, with the two islands getting smaller and smaller. The great tree on the second island stayed visible for a long time, and I wondered if Hafsa was up there. I was longing for this place already, but it wasn't for what I had thought it would be, only a couple weeks ago.

Chapter Twenty Nine (Ava)

"It's good that things aren't as bad as before, at least," Genette said.

"Yeah." I sighed. I'd just finished telling her about how things have been going at home for the past two and a half weeks. "How have things been with you?"

"Oh, pretty good," she said. "It's been the same as usual for the most part. Grandma Fran and her friend down the road, Nancy, have been trying to recreate the tree sap cake Sid brought home but they can't figure it out. Our neighbor has started to reinforce the old barn because he'd like to get some goats."

"That'll be cool," I said. "I love goats and sheep."

"They're so cute but so mischievous," she said. "Goats anyway. What else have I not told you already… Oh, Sid and Hafsa have been talking every once in a while. She's busy at home but they talk when she's free."

"How're they doing?"

"He's good, really good. He's very happy but he does miss Gwen and Ripley. He's looking forward to this weekend."

"It'll be nice to see you in person again," I said, smiling. We were all going to Ottawa Pride together.

"Yeah," she said, and I could tell she was smiling too. "And, uh, Hafsa's good too as far as I know. Missing everyone. She's

not sure if she can make it."

"That's too bad. Has Sid heard from Ripley?" He was away on one of his trips.

Gwen threw open my door suddenly. "Ripley can visit us next week before school starts!" she cried. "Oh, are you on the phone with Genette? Is Sid there?"

I tilted the phone away from my face. "Let me talk to her in peace. And learn to knock."

She groaned and turned around, closing my door.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay," she said, laughing. "I miss her."

"Oh I bet you do, you don't live with her."

"I guess we'll be seeing each other soon, then?"

"Yeah!"

"Tell her Sid says hi, okay?"

I sighed through a smile. "I will."

"Dinner is ready," Gwen said through my door.

"Oh, dinner is ready, I gotta go," I said to Genette, sliding off my bed. "Bye."

"Enjoy, I love you," she said.

"I love you too," I said, a smile overtaking my face. She hung up and I put my phone down, shaking out my excitement. She'd first said it when we were dropped off, wanting it to be in person, but it still made me giddy every time.

Gwen was there when I opened the door. "Was Sid there?" she repeated.

"Were you waiting here the whole time?"

"It was like two seconds," she said. "Has Sid said anything about me?"

"You can text him, can't you?"

"Yes I can text him, but did he say anything about me?"

I passed her and started down the stairs. "He did, actually."

"Really? What did he say?"

"That you're nosy and annoy your big sister," I said, sticking my tongue out at her on the lower part of the spiral.

She groaned again and rushed past me.

I laughed and followed her into the kitchen. "He did say hi, though!"

She huffed as she opened the fridge. "Do you want any juice?"

"Can I get a soda?"

She handed me a can and told me everyone was outside. We went out onto the porch, watching Alan, Henry, and Aileen getting the fire going near the dock. Alan looked up and gave us a big wave. I waved back.

"Can you get out the foraged plants?" he called.

"Okay!" Gwen said and went back in.

I put my drink down on the table and followed her to get plates.

"It's okay," she said, "I can get it myself."

"I'm getting plates and stuff."

We brought the stuff out and I set the table. Earlier that day, me and my siblings had gone out and foraged for all sorts of stuff in the area: wild asparagus, carrots, raspberries, tons of blueberries, cattails, Canada lilies, goldenrod, oxeye daisies, and more. Gwen agonized over the plating while I went down to ask Alan what he was making for dinner.

"I could do up some bass," he said thoughtfully. "I caught a few the other day."

Henry and I both gagged.

"What? Is my cooking that bad?"

I laughed and said, "No, I'm sorry, it's just that we ate so much fish at camp."

Gwen leaned over the railing. "Is he making fish tonight? I'm sick of fish!"

We all laughed uproariously.

Aileen patted Alan's back. "We have some pork chops in the freezer."

He sighed. "I was hoping it could be a wholly fished and foraged dinner…"

Alan cooked the pork chops on the barbecue while we picked at the foraged plants. Henry was antsy and kept going down to the fire to make sure it wasn't unattended, even though Aileen stayed down there to keep away from the bugs. I tried not to think about it.

When dinner was cooked, we brought our plates and sat around the fire. Gwen broke out the marshmallows even though Aileen politely told her they were for after dinner. Even though we had metal marshmallow roasters, Alan got us all nice sticks and Gwen found another thing to agonize over: stripping them of bark.

Henry hadn't said one mean thing all night. He hadn't said too much in general, but I guess less is more. He spent a lot of time poking at and adding to the fire, watching the cinders dance, watching the flames eat the wood. I wondered what he was thinking, if he felt okay.

When we were done eating, Aileen took our dishes in and packed up the leftovers.

"What a beautiful sunset," Alan said, gesturing over the lake.

It was a strip of orange and yellow over the trees on the far side, with the sun like a big blood red eye dropping below the black and dark green line. The lake was nearly black too, where it wasn't lit up with blood orange and rusty red streaks, rippling with the waves. The sky was still blue, getting darker in

a beautiful gradient over our heads. Over the house, the moon was up, and stars were starting to paint the sky. I sighed happily. It was always so beautiful out here. I'd been here for years, but I never got over it.

Aileen came down and stood behind Alan for a while, rubbing his shoulders. Then she told us she was going to go inside, saying the bugs were getting too much for her.

"Me too," Gwen said, scratching her arm.

"I'll come in too then," Alan said, standing up. "Ava or Henry, whoever's out last, don't forget to put out the fire, okay?"

We nodded and they went in. I stood up and walked down to the shore, watching the water roll over the rocks, pushing them about. It was interesting that the water was so richly colored further out, but when it thinned out over the shore, it barely did anything to discolor the gray and brown stones. When a few too many bugs had bitten me, I went back up into the shelter of the smoke.

Henry looked up at me briefly, but swallowed audibly and stabbed at the fire, keeping his focus off me.

I stood by him awkwardly for a long few moments before I asked, "Do you, uh, want some more bug spray?"

"I'm fine," he said quickly, then sighed. "Thank you, Ava."

I knew it wasn't just about the bug spray. I smiled, a bit tightly but still a smile, and sat beside him.

The door opened and we both looked up to see Gwen coming down to see us.

"Hey," I said.

She pulled over a chair and sat on Henry's other side. "Hi."

"Are you sure you wanna be out here with me?" he said, getting right to the point.

"Of course," we both said at the same time.

"You're still my brother," Gwen said.

I nodded. "And I know you're working on yourself."

"You have been kinder."

"At least not as mean," I corrected with a sly smile.

He managed a laugh. "You've noticed?"

We both nodded. I brushed my hair out of my face; it had gotten to an annoying length, but I liked how it looked with dark roots and bleached ends.

"Thank you," he said softly. I barely heard him over the popping and hissing of the wood. "I try really hard. I've been trying, lately. It's good to know that you do care about me enough to see that."

"I care about you because you're my brother," I said.

"Even after everything I've done to you?"

"Yes," Gwen said, scooting her chair closer. "It's hard to think about it but I think you have to have your reasons for it, right? You wouldn't just…"

"No," he said, "I wouldn't just hurt you."

We were quiet for a while. I mulled over the many times he did just hurt me. Maybe there was a reason, maybe there was another angle, his side of the story. No, not maybe. There had to be. I closed my eyes and sighed.

"I'm never going to hurt you again," he said. "I promise."

I opened my eyes but looked at my feet. "I believe you."

Gwen squirmed. "I'm gonna be a better— sibling, too."

"Hey, this isn't about you not being good enough," Henry said.

"I know, it's just," she pulled at her hair for a moment, then visibly thought better and tucked her hand under her thigh. "I know I'm a bit mean to you both. I argue, I run away from problems, I'm nosy—"

"That was a joke," I interrupted.

She looked at me plaintively. "It's true, though."

I looked down. "I guess so…"

"We all have to do better for each other and for ourselves," she said.

"You're right," I said after a minute. "I need to stop jumping at everything you do, Henry. I'm sure that doesn't help you feel like you're getting better. And I need to not push you both away, or compare myself to you, Gwen. I'm not as vocal about it but I know you feel it and I know it must suck."

Henry sniffled and hastily dried his eyes. "I really appreciate this, guys…"

"I'm proud of you," I said. "Both of you."

He covered his mouth and stared into the fire.

"Me too," Gwen added. "I love you."

"I love you too," I said.

Henry rubbed his face; I didn't expect him to say it back, but he did.

Gwen yawned. "Let's go in, it's late."

Henry got water from the lake to put out the fire, then we all went in together. Alan and Aileen were on the couch and a movie was playing quietly. We piled on to watch it with them. Aileen was falling asleep in Alan's arms, but when he asked her if she wanted to turn in for the night, she said she wanted to stay up to see us to bed. All around me, there was love, and I was basking in it.

The End

About the Author

Laika Wallace (she/he/it/sie) is a dog who died in space. No wait, that's just Laika. Laika Wallace is a disabled Indigenous horse wo/man whose many ghosts haunt the streets of "Canada" creating poetry, fantasy & sci fi novels, music, and mixed media artwork, exploring what it means to be alive in many forms.

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